

IAN
OF THE
ORCADES

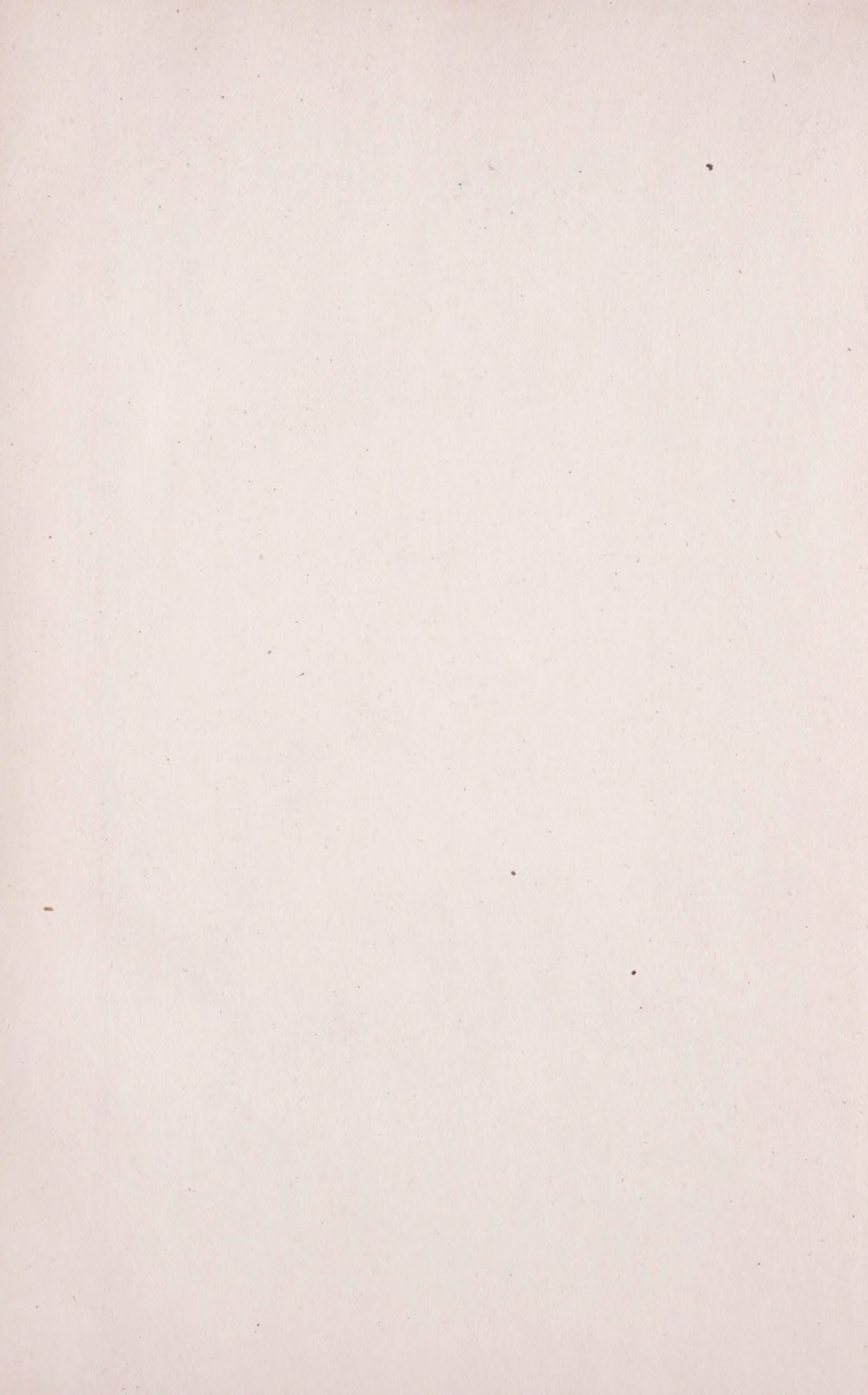


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Frontispiece.

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IAN OF THE ORCADES.

IAN OF THE ORCADES

OR

THE ARMOURER OF GIRNIGOE

BY

William WILFRED CAMPBELL

AUTHOR OF

"THE SAGAS OF VASTER BRITAIN" AND OTHER POEMS

With Illustrations by
ROBERT B. M. PAXTON



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TO
HIS GRACE THE DUKE OF ARGYLL
“IAN OF THE ISLES”
MY CHIEF, KINSMAN, AND FRIEND
THIS VOLUME IS
AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED

DALCHENNA, INVERARAY

19th August 1906

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IAN OF THE ORCADES

CHAPTER I

“A noble house of noble age,
Of high and mighty line.”—ANON.

FULL fifty years have come and gone with their mirk and shine, their seed-time and harvest, since the first of the matters indited in these writings came into my life. Yet it seemeth but yesterday that I was a boy, with the wind of the sea and moor in my face, and the dim, unformed hopes of youth in my heart and mind.

That mine is a sad tale is not of mine own making, but is even the work of a greater One who showeth His might in the vast seas and the hushed tempest; and if there be anything of ill on my part in the events and scenes herein described, may my children and my children's children forgive, as Heaven forgiveth, the one who hath stumbled in darkness not only of the flesh, but even of spirit and heart.

Ours is a great house, and to it have come great storms, yea tempests, that have shaken and swept as

God sweeps the hills that tower, while the glens and straths are protected in shelter. This hath ever been the history of our whole land of Scotland, from the days of my great ancestor the Bruce, and long before, wherein the mighty have fallen or have seen much ill, while the poor and humble have waxed strong in condition and spirit.

As far back as man can remember, our ancestors have held these wide possessions of mountain and moorland, strath and bay, and wild islands of the Orcades ; and ever slowly but surely one by one have they dwindled from kingdom to principality, principality to earldom, until some time, not in my day, nor perchance my children's children's day, it may please God that this ancient stronghold, Girnigoe of the Cattynes, stand waste and desolate, and the stranger sit in the place of command, while the heir of an ancient line is unknown, forgotten, and in a far country. Such doth it some time seem to me shall come to pass, that is, when the great sadness cometh over me of darkness and dream which some call the cloak of second sight, a gift or malady of blood inheritance in our family, but which, methinks, cometh rather in my case from the long hours of lone broodings which held me in the dark days of my blindness, before once again I began to see dimly the face of beloved and friend, of sky and great water, of mountain and sun.

But I must to my tale, for there is much to relate, a heavy account to make, and a dark road to follow, with

burden of ill and sorrow to innocent and guilty, as is ever in this strange and mysterious world.

My earliest memory dates back to a time when I was an eerie lad with an old heart in a young body, like an old sword in a new sheath, who dwelt with an unhappy lady, my mother, in a rude stone sheiling on the rugged end of a strath, which lieth somewhat to the south beyond the castle. Here we were attended by an old woman and her husband, an aged retired forester, and here I dwelt, a lone child, cut off from my kind, with but half a mind for play and a great love of dreaming, companion for the most part to the glen wind and the voice of the sea, which ran, a shining blade, in the land's lap before my home.

There were few who came to see us in the lone glen where we dwelt, save a stray traveller, or a mountain deer-man to consult with Murdo Morrison or Murdo of the Glen, as the old man was called, who in his day and time had been a king's huntsman—though now long waxed past his prime—for his fame for knowledge of woodcraft and venery was great in the land.

Saving these, we were shunned and alone, as though we had been under ban of Mother Church. Scarce a woman or child entered our glen, and the slow knowledge I gained of the world was gleaned from the far glimpse of a lonely, solitary sheiling, in some glen apart from ours, or the passing of mighty and humble, with flash of pennon or dusty garb, to and from the great castle beyond. Old Murdo was but slow of speech and sparing

with his words, but I liked him in my way, though I could never feel that he was of my kin. Less did I like his wife, Annas, an old woman of much piety and human activities, who, by but or ben, gave me nor other any peace with the clatter of her tongue day or night till a merciful fate took her to her fathers for their ill and the world's good. I will not say but that she loved one person—my mother—the single soul in this world whom my childhood clung to, loved, and wondered at, as a being out of place and out of the world's mind, shut off in that weird, outlandish place; for she was what the world calls a great lady, and, from what my childish heart read in the old woman's words at stray times, a wronged and ill-fated one. I read this even more truly in my mother's face, and, child as I was, I read with it death and a broken heart as plainly as sea and wind have graven ruin and age into the face of our ancient mountains. She was ever ill and wasted, like one eaten by some slow disease which disfigures not while it slowly grasps its victim, but which ever made her more beautiful and noble looking. For she was a beautiful woman, if a sad one, and I never wearied of gazing into her face and of holding her hand when she would have me about her, for she preferred that I should be out of doors and grow strong and some time be a man and avenge her woe. So I would go forth and clench my teeth and my boyish fist, and tell the mountains and the sea what ill would come to those who had made her spirit ache and her heart break when I were once a man.

Thus time went on until I grew to be a sturdy boy—one not ill-favoured in limb and feature, but silent and moody and full of whims, from being much alone, with somewhat of that ruggedness from simple fare and much outdoor life such as comes to those who dwell in these northern straths. So I dwelt with my childish fancies and my mother's sorrows in the vague imaginations of childhood, nor ever dreamed that I had a father in the world beyond, or out of it.

CHAPTER II

THE telling of this tale will be but a slow and laborious task, as I am but a poor clerk, though my noble mother, God assoil her, in her moments of strength, when the disease was light upon her, strove to put some of the knowledge of letters into my head. Father Angus, however, hath since told me that a woman hath no gift for such work, yet it seemeth me that what I got of knowledge from my mother sank deeper into my heart than all the cunning lore of the wily priest, and his crooked subtleties of thought and action.

That time, as I afterward came to know to my poor sorrow, and as all Scotland now knoweth, was the day of the weak rule of my godly, but scarce kingly, royal cousin John Stewart, commonly called Robert the Third, and the ill he got, he, and his sad-fated son, David of Rothsay, whose fortune seemeth much like mine own, with a dreader ending, at the hands of the cruel and bloody Duke of Albany. It is not, however, for me to deal with that matter here, as this history is but a crude tale of mine own part in those evil days of a weak king and an ill counsellor, though what I suffered at the hands of mine evil cousin, the cruel Albany, and

the knowledge it hath been my fate to glean of this strange man's nature and attitude toward God and man, even towards his own king, shall be related in its proper place. Meanwhile, remote from the world of courts and castles, their great splendour and greater ill, I passed the short years of my early boyhood shut out in the loneliness of this northern strath, with the voices of sea and land to speak within mine ears, and the ghostly fingers of sea-mist and mountain rains to touch me with their close affinity of sadness and spiritual dream, until I became as it were a part of them ; all of which hath had influence on my spirit ever since, when an event happened which changed my whole life and opened up the door of a darker and more woeful existence.

That winter, the first that lieth heavy on my mind, because of the dread spring which followed it, being as I understand the fifteenth year of my boyish existence, was a hard one where all are hard and cruel in these northern wastes that face on the anger and wrath of the North Sea. There was much suffering in glen and strath even to the southward, and the poor towns to the eastward of the extreme of our shire called the Cattynes, but among the poorer in the upper straths it was a bare existence at best, and had it not been for a secret knowledge of venery, the nearness of mountain woodlands, and a high and enduring spirit, few would have been in the flesh by the season of the Shrovetide. In our mean household, however, there seemed naught in our

plain way ever wanting, and it hath since come to my knowledge that we were as fortunate in this matter as we had been unfortunate in our other relations to the world about us, in that we were secretly provided where others went in want. Up in our strath the snows came so deep, and the storms blew so hard, that, rugged as I was by my continued life in this climate, yet I found it for many a day difficult to get beyond our drifted doorstone, and many a poor wild creature was found stiff and stark when the rude gale went out to sea and left death in its snowy shroud mantling our northern coasts.

But this dread season had a more evil influence on the disease which held my poor mother, and though she lingered beyond the time of storm and snow, and lived to see the first leaves put forth their greenness, yet it was but the time before the end. One day in the late spring the end came, and that event, at once sad and strange, happened, which killed my childhood and opened up to my untutored nature a new knowledge of my rights and their relationship to the base intrigues and ambitions of a wicked world.

Well on in the afternoon of a fine day, I had gone with a fairly light heart up the greenness of the strath, whistling to my dog as a boy will where sorrow, heavy though it may be, can lie but a light weight on the innocent heart of childhood, when of a sudden I heard a call, and looking back saw the old man Murdo hobbling slowly toward me with the word that I was wanted.

There was a look upon his face and a sob in his voice which made my heart to turn cold and my brain to spin round, for I knew that the dread hour had come which I had long expected ; and dumbly, like a wounded animal, I followed at his heels and re-entered the cottage. The room or part of the sheiling which my mother and I occupied was long and low, and but little better, save for some few matters, than that commonly allotted to the peasantry ; and there, on the rude couch where she had so long reclined, lay my mother, with the look of death on her beautiful face. By her side there stood a strange man in the garb of a priest, whose strong yet sinister face darkened at sight of mine like the quick shade made by wind on water. I waited not because of him, though my mind seemed to take him in with but an ill liking, but rushed to my mother's side, where her poor wasted face sought mine and her worn fingers clutched at the coverlet.

“Mother ! mother !” I cried ; “leave me not, oh ! mother !”

“My poor bairn ! my poor friendless bairn !” she cried ; and her hand shook so that the jewelled cross she held, the only thing of value she had ever possessed to my knowledge, fell from her grasp.

“Daughter, or rather cousin, I should say,” spoke the sinister priest, “it is written that for their sins the great have been brought low and the mighty humbled, but make thy peace with God, and I will see to it—indeed, the Mother Church will see to it—that justice

shall be done, and that he who hath wrought this shall eat of the price of his sins in the day thereof."

"Speak not of him!" cried my mother, starting up, and a faint tinge coming to her cheek. "But did I know, Father Angus, that thy love for my son's rights were as great as the hate you bear him who hath done all this, I would die easy."

"Yea, madam, an 'twere a great love to be so great," said the priest. "Yea, I swear it." And he clutched the cross where I knelt at his side.

"Nay, nay, not that," cried the dying woman, "for fear worse ill may come. There hath been too much sin already, but swear fealty to him who is the head of thy house, and I will die content."

At that he stood up and went white, then red, and a dark look followed like that he had worn when I first entered. Then he said, slowly and sternly, "It is a hard task you set me, madam. Evil as I have been, it is too much. Ask me all but that."

At this my mother half rose in her couch and a red spot came in either cheek as she said, "Then take the curse of a dying and a wronged woman, one ye have helped to wrong!" And I marvelled much and shrank back in my sorrow, for my mother had ever been a gentle woman.

"I will do it!" he said, with a strange side-look at me. "I will do it, partly for the fealty, partly for the vengeance."

"Then God assoil ye, Angus, for the wrong done me.

The vengeance may burn out, as hates and loves do in this world, though I wish him no wrong who is, who is——” Here her voice broke. “But I know you will be true to this oath.”

“The vengeance will never die,” said the priest. “But fear ye not, my lady; I will keep the oath.”

Then a strange thing happened, which I marvelled at greatly, and for a long time after it gave me deep thought.

“Ian,” said my mother; “Ian”—and there was a strange tone as of pride in her voice for the first time in my memory of her—“Ian, my son, stand up.” And much wondering, and in great sorrow, I gat me to my feet. Whereat this great priest—because, for all his ill look, he was a handsome man, and stately, and looked to be one fit for command—got him on his knees to me, as I had never seen any do, save to God. And as I marvelled, not without fear, my mother said, “Ian, give him thy hand.” Like one who hesitates, I paused, and then stretched forth my small hand, which he took and carried to his lips, which act made me wonder the more that he should so demean himself to a poor mountain boy raised in a sheiling. And I marvelled the more because, his face being partly turned from my mother where she lay, there still hung on his looks that evil, cruel smile, as of one who would play, as I learned afterward, at mock courtiership. At the time, however, I but saw and understood in my boyish way, and feared, knowing not why. And

it seemed to me that the man knew how much I read him, and what I felt, and enjoyed it in his own evil way. Not that the scene was not all solemn enough, for, though I was ignorant of the matter, I could not but feel that it had to do with something strange in our lives, and this made it all the more dreadful.

“Angus,” said my mother, after gazing at the priest in silence for some time, “Angus, wilt thou be true to the fiar of thine house, wilt thou serve him in peace and in war, in ill-time and weal-time, and defend him from the fire and the steel, and wilt thou be as his blade in the sheath to deal to the death with his foes ; wilt thou do this for him who is prince and earl of strath and glen,—wilt thou do all this, Angus Dhu, under the blight and ban of the ancient earls of the Orcades ? ” I knew not then, but afterward learned that this was a dread oath which the most abandoned of our house would not dare break, even though he murdered priest at the altar and violated God’s sanctuary. Yet I saw that he felt it deeply, and his face went white for a moment ; but in the end he said, far down in his throat, as with an effort, “ I will do it, mistress of my house ; I will keep this oath till I die.” Whereat my mother cried, “ Now I die easy.” And he arose, catlike, and with the silken polish of one used to courts, and stood with that sardonic smile on eye and lip.

“ Ian, my son,” cried my mother, “ come to me.” And I fell on the bed at her breast and wept. Then she said, “ Kiss me, my son,” and I kissed her ’mid a sad

silence, for my heart was too choked for words, as is the way of youth.

“Ian,” she said, “be a good man, be true to thy God and thy house.” Then she gazed on me with a long, hungering look, and I saw, as one who looketh on a far-fading sunset, a grey peace steal over her face, like on a beautiful land where the day goes out. Then the dread priest, for the first and last time with some compunction of tenderness, led me sobbing from the room, while the wild wail of the death coronach from the woman and man of the house told me that I was alone in the world.

CHAPTER III

ONLY he who hath suffered as I have, and so early in youth, may feel somewhat of the woe and heartbreak which that, the following, week held for me. With a child's fear of death I fled from the house where that beautiful mask, which had once been my mother, now lay, in that white stillness where all earthly care hath an end.

Up the strath I went, my dog whimpering at my heels as though he felt for my grief, no more whistling, but with a cold stupor upon me, that ever anon was changed to terrible weeping as if my heart would burst with its dread sorrow and loneliness.

There was a place where my mother would sit in the old times before she became so weak, where there was a clear spring like to limpid crystal, which sprang from a rock under a high cliff; and beside it were the remains of an old cairn and underground house—some said made by the fairies, those little folk who inhabited this place long ere our ancestors came. It was a quiet and secluded place, and here I used to play, while my mother sat and watched me; or, when tired, I would hold her hand in mine, and we would sit and think,

for she was a woman of little speech, and I have thought since that her great trouble concerning me made her dumb with sorrow and grief that she could not share with me. Here I came now and wept out my childish woe, so that by the day of the funeral my mind was, if not more settled, at least worn and benumbed.

It was a grey day on sea and shore when they bore her out and laid her to rest in a lonely place by the hillside. There were none present save our own household and a few others called in for the purpose, so that it was a quiet and sober funeral, as became a lonely and sad life. The priest, with his sinister face, was the only stranger there. When he had hurried through the rites of the Church, for which he seemed to have but little love, and they had closed in the rude stones of the place of sepulchre, the few attendants departed and left me alone. Then a great sense of desolation overcame me, and I threw myself in bitter anguish on the stones beneath which she lay. As I moaned there I felt a touch on my shoulder, and the priest was beside me. I stood up with some embarrassment, for I feared and disliked him, and cared not that he should see my sorrow, which he seemed in an unnatural manner to enjoy, like to one who feeds on this world's bitterness.

"Boy," he said sternly, "thy fathers were men; tears are for women only. Dry this your woe, and shame not your race."

"My race!" I said slowly, and with effort, for I

was timid of speech with strangers, and with this man especially; "I know no race, but my heart bleeds because that I am so lonely." And my pride smote me that I had opened my soul even a little to this cold man.

"Lonely," he answered, in his cutting way; "the whole world is lonely. See yon bleak moorland, it is no more lonely than are most lives. Look on yon vast desolate ocean, it is a blossoming oasis to the desolation that holds some souls. This world, boy, is but a wild desert, and men the cruel beasts that infest it, to clutch at each other's throats. Dry thy woe, and take this which I have brought you. It is thine by right, for thou art nobly born." And he drew from under his mantle a small belt of shining, wrought steel links, on which was worked a crest, and attached to which was a short dirk of wondrously wrought metal richly inlaid with rare stones; and ere I could think, he was kneeling again in that strange fashion, as he had done at my mother's bedside, and had belted it about my waist. My wonder now overcame my fear of the man, and a queer feeling as of power of command possessed me, a sense such as had come to me before when out in the strath alone, and I looked down at him and said, "Who am I?"

"You," he said, "are Ian of the Orcades, earl and lord in the eyes of Heaven, and I am thy vassal." Then taking my hand in the same mocking way, he, with one knee on the ground, kissed it as though I had been

a king and he a courtier, and ere I had time to answer, had turned and left me.

When he had gone, and I had recovered from my boyish wonder, I drew the dirk, for I knew it was one, from the sheath, and it flashed in the air, and I wondered the more that I, a mountain boy, should be given such a weapon and for what purpose, because I feared the man, lest he owed me some hate and wished me no good save for his own ends. Of his strange words to me and those of my mother to him on her deathbed I could make little sense. I resolved, however, to ask old Murdo, as my desire was to solve the mystery. As I approached the sheiling again a strange thing happened, for old Murdo no sooner saw me with the gleaming belt and dagger at my waist, than a great fear and trembling took him, like one who hath a palsy.

“What aileth thee, Murdo?” I cried. “Art thou ill?” For I loved the old man and feared the loss of another friend.

“Ian, dread Heaven, boy, where got’st thou that?” pointing at the belt and dagger.

“It is mine own,” I cried in wonder, and with a certain pride.

“Thine own! This is a madness. Thou hast done what will be thy ruin, boy. Tell me quick, where got’st thou that?”

“First,” cried I in anger, “you must tell me who am I, and what this means.”

"I may not, rash boy," he cried. "But this means death to thee and me."

"Death or not," I cried, for I was desperate, "I little care. There is something in me, old man, which tells me that I was born to command and you to obey. Now tell me who I am and what this means," and I looked at him as I had looked at the priest, and he started back in alarm and astonishment. Then he bent on one knee.

"Ian, lord," he said, "forgive me, an old man, if I may not tell thee, it is not for thee to know, but if thou wouldst not bring ruin and death on one who hath loved and served thy mother and thee, in the name of Heaven tell me who gave you yon dagger and belt?"

"The priest," I answered.

"The priest!" he said. "Not Father Angus?"

"The same," I said.

"The devil," cried the old man. "The dark, scheming devil, his hate is still upon him, he will never stay till all be doomed." He spake this to himself, then turning to me, "Boy," he said, "dost thou know that it meaneth death for him who weareth yon bauble?"

"Death?" I cried.

"Yes, death," he answered. "To me or any, but more so to you, did he who hath the power or any of his following but see thee as thou art. Be advised by me, give me yon that I may hide it so that none see it any more, and it bring not ruin upon us all."

“But is it not mine own?” I cried; “and will you not tell me who I am? I am but a lad and it can do none hurt for me to know my name and station, because from what thou sayest and what yon evil priest hath said, coupled with what my sainted mother spake ere her death, it seemeth to me that I am no common person. If this be so, why am I here, and why this strange cloud about my life?”

“My son,” he answered, “there be the words that we can speak and there be the silence which we must keep for the good of all. But thy question is fair, and if thou wilt but be advised and give thy Murdo the skene dhu, she will herself put it where it will be safe, and hurt none, then will I tell thee something of what thou want’st to know.”

“Nay,” said I, “I will not, for it is mine own by right of gift, and no man shall take it from me save by force. But if thou wilt tell me what I would know I will put it off and hide it myself where none may see.” And I unbuckled the belt and hid it and the dagger in my clothes until I should come to the hiding-place I had in mind, for I made inward resolve that nohap what should come to me, I would never yield this, the only clue to my real place in the world which I hoped some day to find out for myself.

“Aye, that be well,” said the old man, “if thou wilt not part with it. But as thou lovest life and liberty, show it to no man, for to do so would be thy death. But I fear me it is in the blood; thou wilt

not be advised, and ever would have thine own wilful way. But, Ian, my son," he continued, "it may be better with thee if thou wilt forget all which thou dreamest and bide here with thy Murdo till thou art a man of valour to carve thine own way in the world."

"Be that as it may," said I. "If you will not tell me I must needs wait; but know I shall when the time comes, even if it be, as thou sayest, my death."

"'Tis like them a', like them a'," mumbled the old man, as he hobbled away to avoid further question.

Scarce waiting till he was out of sight, I hurried up the strath to the hiding-place of my desire, which was naught more than the grave of my mother. For here was mine altar and my link with all I loved and all I suffered, and it was here that I came with my thoughts and dreams. Seeking a little cleft in the rude stones, where it was safe from wind and wet and prying eyes, I hid the only precious possession, save my mother's prayer-beads, which I had in the world, and I seemed to value it the more, by some childish mood, because it boded danger to me to have it in possession. Here I came day by day alone by myself to utter my grief, or to examine and wonder at this dire gift of the weird priest, until at last my sorrow made some abatement, and my desire to know more of the world and what it had in store for me grew stronger. Then an event took place which changed my life and brought me out of my foolish dreams into that world of my heart's desire.

CHAPTER IV

“Dost thou not know that 'tis thy brother's blood
Which thou dost spill? That same breast nursed thee both,
Who now do stand in bitter feud 'neath heaven.”—*Old Tragedy*.

THE days had worn on from summer toward autumn, while naught had occurred to alter my sad life in that lone glen by the North Sea. The place had now become unbearable to my very soul, so that had any chance offered, young and ignorant of the world as I was, I would single-hearted have wended my way and sought my fortune in the world beyond. I still had a foolish hope that the cunning priest would come back and in some way make good his words to my dead mother, for I felt that there was a debt of hate of his to be repaid with which my life was somewhat mixed up, and that not for love of me, but for evil to someone else, he would sooner or later bring himself into my life again. So sick was I of the dull monotony of that lonely glen with that old scolding wife and doting man, that I looked with longing for the worst that the priest might do, for that I was to be but bird-lime to his vengeance had got itself into my precocious boy-mind; nor was I mistaken, as the sequel will

show, but it all came about in a manner which I least expected.

One fair afternoon in early autumn I had gone to my favourite shrine, and, sick at heart, I lay weary and lonely at my mother's grave, when on a sudden I heard an unusual noise, and looking up saw a sight at once the rarest and fairest I had yet seen. It was a small group of men on horse and afoot, that came riding merrily and lightly up the strath, and in their van was one who, as he came nearer, I perceived to be a lad about my own age, though he might have been younger, but he seemed stronger and bolder and nobler of face than I fancied such as I could ever be, by reason of the pleasure and joy of his existence. As he came near, I could see from where I lay that he was one to whom the others deferred, as though he were of high station. When I saw the sun shine on his noble, frank, fair face, and in his golden hair which hung to his shoulders, and saw his fine bold carriage, I felt that he was one whom I could have loved as brother, and this feeling clung to my heart, being but a lonely outcast boy who longed for love and companionship, as the sick, caged eaglet longs for its nest in the far crags. As they came near me, however, a strange shyness of spirit overcame me, who was little used to unfamiliar faces, and mingled with this was a pride of retirement I ever have had, from nature and mine unusual upbringing. So that, much as I longed to be one of this gay company, and to enter into their life, yet I held my

peace that they might ride by or return without seeing me. Meanwhile I marvelled also what could bring horsemen so far up this remote glen, where there was but poor footing, and no road for cavaliers or apparent object for their quest. As I lay and marvelled at this rare lad, his fine manners and rich trappings, and the free way in which he lorded it over those other men who were all of them much his senior in years, a certain anger and heart-burning took possession of me at the contrast he made with my sad life, and which boded no good for our meeting, as what follows will show.

When he had come abreast of where I was he stayed his steed, and, shading his eyes with his gloved hand, called to one of his serving-men—

“There is the hut. By my soul, my tutor Angus is no liar! ’Tis as he hath said. Forward, Roderick. Ride thee forward and tell Murdo of the Glen that I would speak him here on a matter of venery.”

“Will your lordship not come to the hut?” said the man.

“Nay, churl, ’tis my will to stay here; and bid thou him haste, or thy fool-hide shall know my whip;” and without delay the man rode forward. Just then the youth spied me where I lay, and with an insolent laugh which turned all my good will and admiration into hate, and my fear to a cold pride, he came forward and cried, “By the good St. Denis, whom have we here?” And not liking his haughty looks and the cold wonder in the faces of his followers, I slowly rose

from the grave and returned his insolence with a fierce, silent anger that battled with my shyness to burst into vindictive utterance. Not a word did I nor any about him speak, but he looked me over as if I were some strange quarry brought to bay, and then demanded, as one expecting obedience—

“Well, churl, hast thou a tongue, or must I ride thee down?” And he spurred his horse as if to do so; when, blind with anger which found quicker vent in action than in swift speech, I grasped his horse by the bridle and jerked so hard as to almost throw him back quivering on his haunches.

“Thou hound,” he cried in imperious rage, “thou shalt die for this!” And his followers would have attacked me, but he ordered them back.

“On your lives,” he cried, “touch him not, this is my quarrel!”

“Insolent stranger,” cried I, finding my tongue, “would you violate the place of the dead?”

“Stand back!” he again cried, as his followers would have menaced me.

“But, my lord——” cried one of them.

“Nay!” he cried. “See, he is but a lad like myself, and hath spirit, and my father’s son liketh well to quell such a soul.”

“By my mother’s soul,” cried I, “you shall rue it do you touch me!” At this his followers rudely laughed, as if it were all rare sport, but the youth got him from his horse and came toward me.

“Touch thee!” he cried, as he did so. “I will scourge thee, churl, till I curb thine insolent spirit.”

“I am no churl,” I answered, “but as good, and better, than thee.” I know not why I spake thus, but something in me prompted the words, knowing the little I did.

“He shall hang for this,” said the eldest of the following.

“Hang? I shall chastise him first, and hang him afterward;” and drawing a dirk which he wore, similar to the one which I had hid, but not so brave in trapping, he advanced with whip in one hand and it in the other. It now seemed to be in bad case with me, who was but a lad with no experience of such matters, being also unarmed and at the mercy of this strange, headstrong youth and those cruel men who seemed bent on aiding him in any cruelty he might commit. So that I felt that death or humiliation were my fate if something intervened not to prevent. There was one way out of the matter, and that was to flee; but for all my fear, and my heart beat like to burst, there was that madness of pride in me which would have dared anything rather than that I should allow this haughty youth to have his will. Therefore I stood my ground, clenching my fists, and met his insolent look with a bold fierceness that made even him marvel.

“Who art thou, indeed,” he said, “who would gainsay my will?”

"Rather would I know who you are?" I answered in quick reply. "I am dweller here, thou but a strange comer."

"Knowest me not?" he asked, half in wonder, for my proud answer seemed to trouble him.

But here the elder horseman again intervened. "Knowest thou not, rash boy, whom thou art addressing?" he said. But as he spake he eyed me over with some misgiving at my appearance and boldness.

"Nay," I answered. "And why should I, for all thy brave trappings and insolent speech?"

"A truce to this insolence," said the man. "Tell me thy name, boy, or I will hang you to the nearest tree."

"If you will have it, then," I cried in my mad, foolish pride, as if I were acting a part in some wild dream, and though I had but mine own suspicions, and the evil priest's words for it, "I am of noble birth."

"Noble," said the elder horseman, and some started, though the most burst into a derisive laugh.

"Most august lord of the glens," said the youth in mockery, "we would soon have thy hatchments for thy funeral. By what designation would we bespeak your lordship?"

"Ian of the Orcades," I cried. At that they all started, some in fear, some in anger; but I looked the proud lad in the eye and he eyed me back; but neither could look the other down. The elder horseman spat out a terrible oath, and cried, "This play hath gone too far, my lord."

“Believ’st me not?” I cried. But the men all gazed with a strange look at me and the young lad, who also stared at me with astonishment. Then he said, “Who art thou who darest to wear my father’s name?”

“Thy father’s name?” I cried, now startled in my turn.

“Yea, my father’s name,” he said. “And did I not believe thee to be some poor fool, it would seem but a poor play thou playest, though it is but right to tell thee that it meaneth thy death.”

“So I were told,” I cried.

“Dost thou not understand,” said the elder man, “that thou hast insolently and impudently taken to thyself the name and titles of the most puissant noble Ian, who alone is known as Earl of the Orcades, and of this mighty earldom of the Cattynes?”

“’Tis a base lie!” I cried; “as indeed I will show you.” And ere they could stop me I had slipped to the other side of the tomb, and, buckling on my jewelled belt and dagger, faced them. “’Tis a base lie,” I repeated. “See my proof. ’Tis I alone am Ian of the Orcades;” and I drew my dagger and faced them in the sunlight. At that there was a strange amazement writ on their faces, and every man there of the retainers bowed his head ere he could think twice at the sight of me and that gleaming belt. I saw that for the moment I had the most of them at disadvantage; all save the elder man, who swore a great oath and knit his

brows. But the youth, to my surprise, when he saw the belt I wore, uttered a wild cry of rage.

"Impious thief!" he cried. "Where stolest thou my belt?" And ere they could stay him he sprang with uplifted dagger on to the grave and over to where I was. But I faced him with mine, its jewelled hilt gleaming in the sunlight. There we stood like two young cocks in a pit, ready to have at each other.

"Thou hast stolen my father's name: thou hast stolen my belt," he cried, "and thou shalt die!" And he made as though to strike me with his dagger. Now I was new to this sort of business, and for a moment a mist came over mine eyes, but I breathed a prayer and determined to die rather than be conquered.

"My lord," cried the elder horseman, "in your father's name, I command you, this hath gone too far." But the youth faced me with that anger not to be curbed; and as for me, I was beyond all else save a desire to do my part in a game new to mine untutored youth, and to save myself without dishonour.

So there we faced each other with bated breath and daggers lifted each seeking to ward, or get the advantage, when suddenly a stern voice cried "Hold!" and there betwixt us stood the priest, with a look of mingled reproof and sarcastic pleasure on his cruel face.

"So!" he said, eyeing each of us in turn as a mature man may patronise youths when he pleases, "we are having a pretty rehearsal of the old play of Cain and Abel."



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IAN OF THE ORCADES.

"What!" cried the youth. "My worthy tutor, stand back! This is too much even from thee!" And when he faced the priest I saw hatred written on his boyish face.

"It is too much," answered the priest sternly. "Know ye not, my lord, that ye are brothers?"

"Brothers?" cried the youth in amazement, while I stood silent, wondering at this new turn of affairs.

"Yea, brothers," answered the priest, "of the same father. This is thy brother of the half-blood, son of thy father, and but one year thy senior, Ian the bastard." He spake the last word in a bitter way, as though he enjoyed it, and yet it tasted badly in his mouth.

At these words of the priest the train-men fell back in astonishment, and the elder horseman cried, "Father Angus, this be a dangerous matter, we must away."

"Thou art right," said the priest, with that smile on his face, looking at us both, while we stood eyeing each other and beginning to see, as did the others, the strong resemblance betwixt us; save that I, a little the elder, was smaller, and less favoured for my age, whereas my brother, for so now must I call him, was the finer figured, and the blither to look upon.

"Come," cried the priest, "ere you part, my noble nephews, take hands and make friendship for the love of the house where so much love hath dwelt," he continued sarcastically.

"Ian," he said, turning to me, "'tis thy noble brother, the Lord Hugh."

"Nay!" cried my brother, over whose spirit, as I afterward found, a new mood chased the old as sun chases shadow on an autumn morning, "but if he be my brother indeed, why should we part?"

"Yea, that is the question, my lord," answered the priest maliciously.

"More," continued Hugh, "hath he not spirit? Is he not of the blood? Is he not that companion for whom I have long sought?"

"In truth, it is a filial feeling," answered the priest, "and well becometh thy birth and mine upbringing."

"Then," continued Hugh, "why should he not come with us to the castle?"

Here the elder man spake up in some trepidation. "My lord, my lord!" he cried, "remember your noble father, your lady mother!"

"I care not," cried Hugh; "he is my brother, he shall come! I have said it!"

"Well, then," cried Father Angus to the elder man, "we must e'en submit when his lordship decides." But I could see that beneath all he was but too well pleased, and I began to understand that this was his work, this bringing us together, though one look at his face showed that it was for no good to any but himself. As for the other men, they stood back in silence, keeping behind the elder horseman, who muttered and swore under his beard as if he knew this to be but the beginning of storms. As for myself, in the whirl of mingled emotions which occupied my mind I could

think but dimly ; but among these sensations was one which came uppermost, namely, the thought of a chance to escape from my loneliness, added to which was an already budding liking for the young lord to whom I was called brother.

Impetuous and headstrong, he did not ask any leave in the matter, but expecting obedience, he merely asked, " Ian, canst thou ride ? " " I can but try," I answered, and it was but a short space of time before one of his followers was dispossessed of his horse for my benefit, and I was myself one of those gay cavaliers whom I had often envied from my lonely hill glen. I would have stayed to bid the old man and woman farewell, but he would not have it, nor did he wait to speak to the old man on the important matter upon which he had come, for, as I have before said, I soon found that a new toy or a new pleasure only too soon made him forget the old. So, with a last sad look upon the grave of her to whom on this earth I owed a childish love and a pure memory, I mounted as I saw the others do, though more awkwardly, and soon had left the place of my solitary childhood. It seemed a strange dream, with this noble, flashing, new brother on the one hand, and a little behind on the other the furtive-looking priest, who watched us both with a sarcastic inward smile, as of one musing over evil possibilities.

" A rare man that uncle of ours," said Hugh, denoting the priest with a look of dislike. " He and I hate each other cordially."

“Uncle ? ” I cried.

“Of course,” he answered. “Thou dost know but little.”

“I know naught,” I said, in self-deprecation, “not even where we are now going.”

“To Castle Girnigoe,” he answered proudly, “where thou wilt learn all things, my mountain brother ; where we will make a great man of thee, where thou wilt learn to love my haughty mother, to honour my lordly father,” and, he continued in a lower tone, “to hate yon surly but schemingly clever and useful priest, our bastard uncle.”

That word—bastard—again smote on me ; but something forbade my asking its meaning, and had I done so I fear it would have made but little difference in what happened afterward.

CHAPTER V

“It was a massive battlement
Of olden chivalry ;
Each side its mighty towerings kent
Wide mountain and lone sea ;
No man into its barriers went,
But wilful bowed the knee.”

Ballad of Dead Greatness.

AFTER winding slowly for some time down the sides of the strath or glen, it gradually grew wider and the declivities more gentle. At this I was somewhat thankful, for this riding of a brute beast, though pleasant to look at in others, was to me a new and rather rough experience. I found it difficult to keep my seat and hold myself erect in that dignity which became the others, and at the same time to pay attention to the light words of my gallant, new-found brother. But as our grim uncle the priest now rode up abreast of us, he also grew silent, for which I was glad, because, as we proceeded, I began to have uneasy thoughts within myself as to the outcome of all this matter. I was, without doubt, by my solitary life rendered old beyond my years, yet for all this I had conceived a childish pleasure in the excitement of this new experience, which now

began to sober down into the cold maturity of anxiety.

After a little, when we had wended the level banks of the stream that led to the sea, we reached the shore, where a deep bay ran in. Keeping to the westward, we struck what I saw to be a well-beaten roadway along the sands, which at high water was close to the ocean, the waves sometimes covering the tracks, but which, as now, at the tide's neap, did spread in a great damp, fresh-smelling belt of sand and stranded kelp betwixt us and the bitter, curling foam of the but newly returning tide. Riding for the better part of an hour along this deep shoreway, where we saw but few signs of humanity, and those few giving a wide road to our cavalcade of mounted pennons, we at last rounded a rugged point, and there burst on my view for the first time what I was told was the ancient home of my fathers.

I have already written that ours was an ancient house of one-time princely greatness, which had never, as I have learned since (and I now write with a close knowledge of such matters), descended to a less level than royal or noble alliance, and Girnigoe Castle, as was its ancient designation, the chief seat of our family, was well fitted to be the chief dwelling of so proud and headstrong a race, unyielding to king or noble.

All this I knew not at the time, and of my connection with it had but a slight imagination, but my feelings at the first sight of this massive and ominous pile were such as it would be difficult to describe in the ordinary

language of a poor clerk such as I am. The learned Boetius might find words worthy of a description of its proud position and splendid front. There came over me a strange feeling of fear, and a quick realisation of the foolish daring of my speech but a short time before, in claiming to represent that greatness which in one of its splendours now so closely oppressed me. The castle or fortress, for it was, as I learned afterward, in truth both, stood on a wild headland that ran boldly and ruggedly to meet the angry northern ocean which beat in impotent wrath at the foot of its beetling, majestic front.

On a plateau of this austere headland rose the proud walls and bastioned towers of this, the mightiest castle of the north. It was a massive battlement, almost square and of great strength, with walls and turrets of such a height that, as I proved afterward, it made the head dizzy to gaze to the depths of moat and sea-floor from the barbican above. That such a hold in so remote and wild a part of the country should be built in so massive a form to resist all attacks, will not be wondered at when it hath been seen that families like our own, proud and self-supporting, were constantly at trouble with each other, and even with our sovereign the King; so that where people lived in constant danger of assault it behoved them to place stone walls betwixt them and their enemies. When I write, this old keep of Girnigoe is of long and ancient founding, having served my lordly ancestors when they were princes of the

mighty kingdom of the Norraways, ere my famed ancestor, the fierce Sweyn, had infested these coasts and carried fire and sword even to the inhospitable shores of the wild Erse people of the far west. And it yet standeth old and grey like the sea and rocks, its more aged parents, worn like them and grim with the markings and buffetings of Time, the one true ancient of this grizzled universe.

My heart rose more and more into my throat, and my courage sank in comparison, as we slowly approached its walls. After leaving the main roadway, we climbed a steep ascent leading by devious ways to the top of the plateau; and as we did so the leading horseman, Patrick, who had been muttering in bad mood to the priest, hurried on with two of our attendants, whether to prepare for our approach, or to elude being implicated in my matter, I know not. The rest of the party rode behind in sombre silence. The priest now rode grimly by my side, where on the other was the young lord. Soon there arose on our ears the measured and sweet sound of a bell; then, following on it, the louder and more deeply ominous tones of a harsher bell, which came from the castle courtyard.

Scarcely had it ended when Patrick came hurrying down to meet us. "Lord Hugh," he said, "your noble father hath returned and hath brought captive a wild caitiff of the Macleods whom they are about to hang immediate, and your lady mother hath called the devout to sudden prayer for his heathen soul; so you

will please you to make haste, as the caitiff is to have but short despatch." This put a quicker blood into our horsemen, who, like vultures which scent the feast, hastened to the scene. To me it came as but a gruesome welcome to that world of the great and active, for which my heart had sometimes hungered. My brother Hugh rode unconcerned, as high-born youth used to scenes of such recrimination and justice ever do. The priest pressed somewhat closer to my steed, and eyed my countenance with his iron smile, as if reading my misgiving and lack of spirit on mine entrance to the power and custom of Castle Girnigoe.

"'Tis but a sorry home-coming for thee, Master Ian," he commented. "But it will be as well to know thy father as he really is. The meeting is like to be a stormy one at best, but whatever happeneth, fear not, and I will stand thy friend." With which cold comfort he fell behind, and allowed me to follow my brother into the now decidedly grim and uninviting courtyard of the castle. As we had approached across the plateau the castle appeared like a huge grey wall, its gloomy turrets frowning down in a forbidding manner. Around the side ran a deep moat or ditch flooded with water, that washed the foot of the walls, and not to be crossed save by a high drawbridge of heavy timbers, worked by some quaint, ancient mechanics, which were set in motion at our approach, letting the structure prone across the moat, over which we hurried,

and were ushered through a narrow bastioned gateway into the large yard of the castle.

Here even Hugh grew taciturn and stern in manner, and bidding me follow him, we being deserted by Father Angus, who alighted and strode to his ghostly work in the chapel, rode to one side of the walled space, and without dismounting remained silent, and, so far as I was concerned troubled, spectators of the occurrence about to take place. Around the courtyard were lined the serving-men and armed retainers, grim and sullen, but careless for the most part concerning what to me was an awful deed. On the opposite side from where we stood, was stationed, chained to a link in the wall, a savage-looking man of great proportions and singularly bold and wild aspect, who eyed the throng about him with a sort of high contempt, as if their attitude and action mattered but little to him. Near him on each side stood a keeper or guard in partial mail, and armed with blade and spear. Above his head there dangled from a beam a strong loose cord of some tough fibre, showing the manner in which he was to be ended.

The sight of all this, with the anticipation of the terrible tragedy about to take place, crowding as it were upon me so soon after my peaceful, protected manner of life, turned me of a sudden sick, as though the world went round for a moment. Then recovering myself, I determined to abide the issue. Silent we stood there in the sunny day, prisoner and guards,

and we, spectators of it all, while outside the sea glistened and the sky shimmered as if all was glad and sweet in the world. Then out of an archway at the upper end of the courtyard there issued a tall man clothed completely in armour and followed by several retainers. His ruddy fair hair, high flushed face, and proud step proved him to be the man who held that little community of souls in the grip of his steel glove, Ian of the Orcades, and yet the man whom I was told was no less than my father. I knew him at once by his likeness to Hugh, though there was in eye and mouth a cruel expression which boded ill for the wild prisoner, and for me when my turn should come. He strode down and faced the prisoner with a grim look, while you could have heard a cricket chirp, so quiet was the hush for a space.

“Malcolm Mac-Ian,” he said in taunting tones, “thou art my guest at last. What hospitality wouldst thou crave at my hands?”

“None,” cried the wild man, in a stern defiance. “Let the dog of the Orcades but giff Malcolm her own freedom and her plade and stand her front for one stroke, and she herself will thank him.”

“Nay! robbing, murdering dog,” cried the earl, “thou shalt dance there,” and he pointed at the rope; “dost thou not choose thine own death!”

“Let her pe shoot like the deer of her own glen,” cried the wild man, dropping his head on his breast; “her will not complain.”

"Tie him up!" cried the earl, and in a trice he was braced to the wall; while my legs shook against my beast's sides in horror.

"Bowmen, to the wall!" he commanded. And as soon as one could speak, six archers were ranged near us, opposite to where the grim prisoner sternly but bravely confronted us.

"Pick me his right eye! A silver bit to the best shot!" cried the earl; and ere I could hide my sight the wild prisoner was quivering with arrows. "Let him die now," cried the earl; and, brave to the last, but cursing us all in some wild, and to me unknown, tongue, the fierce prisoner died.

I knew now that all depended on mine own courage how I should fare later with this fierce man, whom I claimed as father; but for my life I could not prevent that for a moment a mist came before me, and a rushing in mine ears at sight of that dread scene; at which Hugh, noting my horror, said—

"Courage, brother, fear not; he loveth a brave man but hateth a craven, which thou art not. Speak him bold. Whatever he says his bark were worse than his bite." But this was little comfort, for the world about me had scarce grown steady again when Hugh said quickly, "Dismount!" and, like one in a bad dream, I got me off my horse, and saw a terribly cruel face before me and heard a stern and harsh voice say—

"How now, sirrah, who art thou?"

I choked for a moment, then, remembering Hugh's

warning, said boldly, "Ian, son of Ian of the Orcades."

When I uttered these words I thought he would have killed me where I stood. He was too enraged to speak. He raised his gloved hand, and I counted the heart-beats which I had left for life, but I knew he was my father who had given me life, a life so terrible and hideous that I cared little to keep it; so I turned my lad's face—white it must have been, but resolute and desperate—up to his, and met him face to face, waiting for the blow to fall which I knew would be my death. Even Hugh could do nothing; and I remember to this hour the sight of those stern men in that courtyard, that grisly dead man filled with bleeding arrows, and that terrible cruel face and gloved hand upraised in the sunlight. If I had died then it would have lived with me through all eternity. It seemed as if the vilest curse of the dead man had but too soon come upon us. Steadily I faced him while the heavens seemed to rain hot iron in my brain; then he seemed to read somewhat in my face, for a softer tone came into his voice, and the hand went slowly to his side as he said, "Thou mad boy, who hath taught thee all this?" Then I found a voice which seemed afar off, and said, "Thou art my father, art thou not?" But he looked moodily on the ground, and answered, as if avoiding the question, "Who hath taught thee all this?"

"My uncle Angus, the priest," I answered shortly.

"Ha! that damned priest! that bastard brother

o' mine. I know he hateth me. Where lurketh he ? ” he cried to the others.

“ The Father Angus sayeth prayer for the dead soul,” answered one of the retainers.

“ Yea, he hath a sweet voice but a black heart,” cried the earl, “ and even at the blessed table doth he chew the wrong my father did him and resolve hates for me and mine. Command him here on the instant ! ”

“ Sir earl, he sayeth prayers ; we dare not,” answered the man.

“ Hail him here, mitre and cowl—I care not—that the base hound may feel mine anger. Hear me, sirrah ! ”

“ But the lady countess, my lord earl, I dare not disturb her,” said the man in a whining voice.

“ Ha ! my lady ! yea,” and the earl looked at me. “ Yea, he can wait. We will not violate her prayers.” Then he seemed to think a moment. “ Boy,” he said shortly, “ this meddling priest did but a bad business to open this matter to thee.”

But I answered, “ It was not only the priest, but my mother also.”

“ Thy mother, lad ? ” he cried. “ What of thy mother ? ”

“ She was the best soul I have known or ever will know in this world,” I answered in anger and sorrow.

“ What ! *Was* ? Did you say *was*, lad ? ” and he clutched me fiercely by the arm.

“ She is dead, my lord earl,” I said, drawing back coldly.

"Dead!" he exclaimed, "and they told me not."

"Father Angus shrived her," I said, "though she needed it not."

"That damned priest again," he cried. "He hath more than I, and I have much, to answer for."

"She prayed for you in her last hour," I said, half angered at my mother's wrong, though I did not know its full ill then, and partly in sorrow that this fierce, evil man were so moved at her name.

"Speak no more of her, boy. I may not stand it! My life hath been one long hell, but the worst I did 'twas my bastard brother Angus led me. I see it now, but I must dree my weird. Get thee gone," he cried fiercely, "let me not see thy face. He did thee an evil turn who sent thee here. I am thy worst foe—the one thou shouldst shun most in all the world."

"But thou art my father!" I cried in strange agony; "whatever hath happened I am thy son."

"Nay, nay!" he cried. "Thou must not say it. This was no slight sin. Believe me, boy, thou must go back whence thou camest, or anywhere out into the world. I will make thee rich and great; but stay not here. Open the gate and let him out, give him attendance, yea moneys; but see that he be gone."

At this Hugh stepped forward. "Father," he cried, "Ian must stay! He is my brother."

"Thy brother! Thou knowest not of what thou speakest. There is that betwixt ye two that may not be spoken! Nay, madden me not, let him go."

“But I say not!” cried the sweet, silvery, clear voice of a woman; and when I heard it I knew that it was the voice of one born to command, and I turned and saw me a new sight which in the dread agony and emotion of the last few moments I and the others had overlooked. From the door of the chapel, at a remote corner of the great grim courtyard, there had issued forth a group of sombrely attired women; and at their head, accompanied by my sinister uncle the priest, walked a tall, noble-looking lady of about middle life. Her figure was one at once commanding and stately; and her face both beautiful and haughty, but wearing a cold austerity of manner that suggested rather the convent than the castle or court. She had in her hands the lower part of a great string of prayer-beads which hung about her neck, and which she had been telling as she walked. They were somewhat similar to those which my mother had ever kept about her, which she gave me on her deathbed, and which I had next my heart as I stood there. I saw in her gaze at me and at my lord the earl, coupled with the look of self-sufficiency on my priestly uncle’s face, why it was that he had dared to bring me here in defiance of the terrible earl. It was not hard to see that if my lord were fierce and headstrong, it was a stronger will than his that ruled at Castle Girnigoe.

As I took this all in, the penetrating voice rose again like the silver tones of a pure molten bell, “Who is this lad, my lord earl?”

“Madam,” he answered, “let me beg you keep to

your prayers, and leave the more worldly matters to thy lord's keeping."

"My lord," she answered, speaking in tones of scorn, "my lord, thou art not so hospitable"—and she denoted with horror the dead man still on the wall—"that thou shouldst be left to deal with strangers within thy gates!"

"I will have yon removed at once, madam," said the earl, "do thou but go to thine apartments."

But she turned to me. "Boy," she commanded, "speak! Who art thou?"

But what with her commanding eyes and the earl's terrible scowl and the priest's grim smile, I could find no voice.

"Madam," I stammered, and could get no further; but here my churchly uncle for his own reasons came to my relief.

"My noble sister," he said, eyeing the earl and me in turn, and speaking in his blandest tones, "seeing that my lordly brother is modest toward you in this matter, wilt thou gaze at the youth, at the young Lord Hugh, and at thy husband, and read the riddle?"

"Nay, nay! it cannot be!" she exclaimed in horror.

"Yea, in truth," answered the priest, "he is thy stepson Ian, thy husband's son and bastard child."

In a moment, as a thunder-cloud lightens, there went a fire over her face, she looked at me, and if hate could have slain I had died there that moment. Then she turned to the earl, who stood sullenly at bay.

“And you! you dared wrong me thus?”

“Nay, madam,” answered the earl, “the wrong, and great it was, was against another; and as for thee, my damned brother, thou and I will come even yet.” But the priest only smiled, and it was easy to see that his smile was more deadly than the other’s hate. Then the earl turned to me in a sort of blind wrath.

“Get thee gone, boy, ere I slay thee!” he cried. “Canst thou not see that this is no place for such as thee? Get thee gone! Thou hast done enough!”

“Nay,” cried the lady, “but he shall stay. He is thy son, and by my duty to the Church he shall stay here that thou mayst see in him thy sin’s remembrance daily in thy sight till thou hast repented!”

“Here, my lady? Thou wilt keep him here?”

“And why not?” she answered. “Is it not thy duty to thy conscience and to an angered Heaven? Yea, he shall stay.”

Yet I saw that her liking grew even worse toward me; but her sense of duty to the teachings of her conscience and desire for the earl’s punishment were equally strong with her intense hate of me.

“Come here, my son Hugh!” she cried, and as Hugh went to her she put her arm about him.

“Hugh, my son,” she said, eyeing me scornfully, “this is a poor misborn youth. He will stay with thee, and thou wilt have him to aid and serve thee.” She spoke to him so tenderly, that through all my

bitterness she minded me of my mother's ways, and my heart went out for a little of that great love which I could see she bore for her son, but which was dead for her husband.

At this the earl could stand no more. "Well, madam and sir priest," he cried, "do ye keep him. Have your will! But, boy," he said to me, "here is no happiness. Girnigoe Castle is cursed with a great gloom of subtlety, priestcraft, and ill for all. I am thy father, shame to me to say it; but thou see'st me such as I am. Make this place what thou canst, but shun me as thou shouldst the plague or yon damned priest brother o' mine." And he turned on his heel and was gone ere I could say a word, could I have thought of anything to say; for I was dazed with dire dismay and sorrow. And for some evil reason of his own I saw that the crafty priest had slunk away too.

"Hugh, my son," cried the lady, "I would speak with the lad alone." She would not speak of me as his brother; indeed, she could never bring herself to look on me in that relationship. "Go, my son," she said, and kissing him on the brow she dismissed him. When he was gone she turned to me, and the love was all gone out of her face, and in its place was that fierce slaying pride.

"Sirrah!" she said, "tell me quick, who was thy mother?" I marvelled then that she should wait to ask me this when we were alone. When, afterwards, I came to understand how one woman will hate another

who has crossed her love and pride, I understood why her pride led her to ask me this in private.

“My mother,” I said, “was a good woman—the best in the world.”

“Thy mother, boy ? Thy mother ? ” she questioned me fiercely.

“Yea, lady,” I cried, “my mother was one of prayers and penances like to thyself. She favoured thee, though not so tall, and she was fair——”

“Her name ? Name me her name ! ” she interrupted fiercely.

“I know not,” I answered in sorrow, “but that she was good and gentle, and these were her prayer-strings, which she gave me at her death. There be somewhat graven on them. Canst thou make it out ? ”

And I handed her the beads, which she, taking in her fingers, saw their value and read thereon what was too difficult for my poor clerkship. Then she cried, “Dread Heaven—this thy mother ? Then thou art—— ! ” She stopped and looked at me in anger and amazement. Then, as if forgetting me, she cried, “My son, my son ! ” as if absorbed in the misery of this new trouble. But I partly knew what she felt ; and I cried out, “Madam, let me go from this place. I am but a poor lone lad ; but I cannot stay to bring misery to thee and thine.”

“Nay,” she cried. “I have given my word ; and though—I will tell thee truth—I would I had never seen thy face, yet it were ill that I, the great-grand-daughter of the King of Scotland, should change my

word for that ; and also for fear that worse trouble come if thou goest ; thou shalt stay here and be my lord's penance for his great wrong. And thou, boy, though thou hast blood of kings in thy veins, yet shalt thou learn to serve my son, but speak no word of thy mother to me or other on penalty of my wrath. The priest shall see to thy learning, and chance, if thou favourest that vocation, the Church may be thy calling ; ” and with a haughty look and a dread one, as if she had but done the most grievous deed of her life, she turned and left me.

The sun was now well lowered and just withdrawing his declining light, and I was alone in the grim courtyard, mine only companion the fierce, dead glensman. And this was my home-coming to Castle Girnigoe, the house of my fathers ! Though much matured by sorrow, I was yet but a lad, and a great sense of desolation welled up in my heart, and, forgetting all, I threw myself upon the bare flagstones, and sobbed as I had once before sobbed on my mother's grave.

CHAPTER VI

THE life that now opened up to me at Castle Girnigoe was in sooth a strange one, and yet one quite in keeping with mine obscure upbringing. I had a chamber allotted to me next to that of mine uncle Angus in a remote part of the castle, where he, for the most part, spent his hours when not singing the blessed Mass, or absent, as was rumoured, in visitation at a neighbouring castellated abbey, the residence of the bishop of our part of the north. This abbey and bishop I shall refer to later on, as both were destined to play a leading part in my life's drama. My uncle's retreat was called the old-tower room, and was in many respects the most remarkable apartment in the castle. It was said to be haunted, and by the spirit of a wizard ancestor of the family, who was believed to have constructed this particular tower by a secret art which he had gotten from a familiar devil, whom he had brought into his power by his dread magic. I have understood that such doctrines are not now as commonly believed by men of clerkly knowledge, yet, for the most part, in our days men believed these spirits to be subservient to wise men. Be that as it may, few in the castle cared

to come near that tower, or the passage that led to it, so that mine uncle had his privacy much to himself; and as my room was of similar reputation, neighbouring as it did on the wizard tower, I found that I was happy in mine early acquired habits of solitude. I must admit that, for all mine evil uncle's ill qualities, he had great gifts as a clerk, and knew much of the occult lore, which, had it come to light, would have brought him to the stake as a wizard. I had a great curiosity with regard to these studies, and found much to interest me in pondering over the ancient writings, weird mechanics, and strange furniture of his lonely apartment. I have since thought that he took a peculiar pleasure out of my superstitious fears and youthful desire to explore those mysteries, for such obscure studies ever appeal to the ignorant and credulous. There is no doubt that much of mine uncle's power over those in the castle, not even excepting my lordly father and his haughty lady, was gained by that reputation which he had for occult science. It was in this room that Hugh and I pursued our studies, though it was but seldom that Hugh could be got to cultivate letters, which he ever averred to be alien to the needs of one born to rule, whose one study should be arms, as necessary to his power and honour; while that of letters, as dealing more with craft, was more fitted for the clergy and those classes who, by reason of their inferiority, had to make themselves of use to others by their skill in such matters.

It thus came to pass that I soon outstripped Hugh in the studies which he abhorred, while he became ever more expert in the science of arms, which vocation never came to me as easy as to others, though I can boast some power and skill as a swordsman. The rest of the household I saw but rarely, save at meals. These were served in the great hall, where at a long table the most of the castle folk sat, except those that served; the earl and the lady countess at the top, with Hugh next, and, a little below, mine uncle Angus and myself, just above the salt, the vessel for the holding of which is used in all great houses to separate the blood kin and those of noble birth from those others who are but vassals and retainers.

On such occasions, which I enjoyed but little, and forsook as soon as manners made possible, the earl drank much and often, and carried him in a boisterous and, I am sorry to say, heathenish manner, little influenced by his lady who sat opposite, stern and forbidding, conversing at intervals with the priest, who grimly loved to see the earl disgrace himself. The lady countess's manner on those occasions was ever reserved and haughty, distant and cold to me and others. Only to Hugh did she unbend, and likewise to Father Angus, who seemingly held a high place in her favour.

The walls of this great dining-hall were hung at intervals with some old pictured hangings of tapestry from the looms and fair hands of the ladies of some far continental country. Betwixt these hung rusted

and grim suits, or half-suits, of mailed armour, more cumbrous and unwieldy than those used in our day. At the head of the hall, where the earl's state chair stood, over a great fireplace was carven in some rude but quaint hand in the stone lintel the name of that famed ancestor of our house who had built this sea-ward hold ; and over it were the ancient arms of our house, the galley or lymphad of the princes of the Orcades.

There was much to appeal to my growing fancy in all the ancient lore and tradition of this place, and especially as, from what I had formerly heard, coupled with my experience since my arrival, I had got a suspicion that in some manner I had been wronged, and that I was indeed the rightful heir of all this vast possession. However, as matters now stood, I saw that whatever might have been in the past was now impossible, and that my life here would have to be one of retainership, if not of servitude, and that my place in the household was one of a very equivocal nature. From the first I noticed that the servants and retainers avoided me, and gave me no looks of reverence such as they gave my brother : and on the part of all, as days went by, I was become as one who moves amid shadows so far as the real life of the place was concerned. Indeed, save for Hugh's boyish fancy for me, and his passing need of companionship, I was like to be left to myself.

On state occasions I was conveniently left out, and on other times was just above the salt, and no more. This all tended to throw me more and more into the

company of mine uncle Angus, and whether there was at bottom some germ of good in the man, which I could never come to persuade myself, or that, like all souls ambitious and subtle, he longed for some spirit kindred to his own on which to make experiment, I do not know; but certainly he took great pains to enlighten me in all those sciences which only the learned indulge themselves in. It seemed that the more I was ignored in the castle the more did he in his own private place treat me as worthy of notice and some deference.

My father the earl, I soon found, was often absent, and those absences for the most part, when not at Court (where he went but seldom, and not for his good reputation there), on wild forays against his neighbours and fellow-nobles of more distant shires, for he was a man turbulent and quarrelsome to a degree. When at home, at meals, where I alone saw him, save when I was called to attend him to some riding or training in which all took part, he was for ever denouncing someone over his flagon. His leading hate, however, was toward the Church, and it seemed to me that the presence of the priest with his sinister face aggravated this feeling, and made him all the worse. His most hated foe, I soon found, was our ecclesiastical neighbour, the Lord Bishop of the Cattynes, a man of great power, spiritual as well as temporal, and, as I afterwards discovered, a secret friend of mine uncle, who, as the event proved, used both the bishop and the earl against each other to their mutual undoing. For it was the hate of my

father the earl towards the proud bishop, and the private intrigues of the latter, which brought about the terrible tragedy in which I took an unwilling part. This bishop, or ecclesiastical lord—for he was in reality such—was, as I learned later, the natural son of some great earl to the south, and who, going into the French countries and getting favour of the Pope, had conferred upon him powers spiritual over a great part of this region under our King. I have since thought that he was sent partly to be a watch over, and check upon, our house, which, being of such princely extraction and great worldly power, gave no little alarm even at Court. This naturally incensed so headstrong and arbitrary a man as my father, who, having no guile, and but his fierce nature, resented what he saw to be a rival in his own country whom he could not reach. The bishop, being also a man of address and parts, so insinuated himself at Court that my father, seeing that he had but little chance of redress there, absented himself more and more, a thing bad for a nobleman at any time, but especially so for my father's reputation, which was at best never too good.

Of this bishop as the years went on I gradually came to know by the varied accounts current in our community, which were but little in his favour. My father when in his cups would curse him in round terms, and give him all the sins in the calendar to his record, such sins as should be fastened on no man, much less a priest or bishop of the Church. The lady countess on these

occasions would look black and mutter prayers over her bead-strings, crossing herself at each especial blasphemy against the lordly ecclesiastic. Mine uncle would smile into his flagon and say nothing, but I was well assured in my mind that it all came to the good bishop's ears by means of the priest's wizard methods, and helped much to fan the flame that burst afterward and brought misery on us all. Among the many ills laid at the door of this proud bishop, but which were only whispered for the most part—for no one save the earl dared speak openly on the subject—was that of being over-zealous in the harbouring of that sex which, since the first days, hath been, wilful or not, a cause of strife and unhappiness to man.

How far this was true, I may not say ; but that he was a powerful and worldly man I had in time good cause to know. One day, during the fifth year of my coming to the castle, mine uncle, who favoured long walks by the seashore—for ghostly meditations the devout said, but those who knew him, as I did, suspected somewhat different—offered me his company, and, whether by chance or by connivance, we soon saw a fine company approaching, more like a great lord's attendance than was my idea of the churchly. At the head rode my lord bishop, richly caparisoned as to man and beast, the only hint of his ecclesiastical position being a beautifully chased gold crucifix, which depended at his waist and glittered in the sun. By his side rode a genial monk, who was much less of the world and

more of the convent in habit, but as plain and rubicund in countenance and port as any of my father's serving-men.

At their approach, mine uncle, who awaited their coming, bent and kissed the great bishop's hand with much deference, and, saying some words of whose meaning I did not catch the drift—but I could easily see there was a familiar understanding betwixt them—led me forward and presented me. I also found my manners and kissed his hand, which I was loath to do, but was rewarded by being received with very courtly words by this man whom I did not like, but who appeared rather what I had heard of a prince than a bishop. Then mine uncle did a strange thing. He spake to me and acted toward me while in this company with a marked deference and respect, and I was surprised to note that the great bishop paid me more deference than was due to my years and equivocal position in the world.

“So this is he?” said his lordship, gazing with a curious interest into my puzzled face. “Well, well, ’tis an old house, thine, my son, and the good father telleth me that thou showest that thoughtful studiousness and distaste for this world worthy of a son of the Church. ’Tis an old house,” he added musingly, “and thou art the last; but the Church hath great power and high office for such as thou art, and for wrongs to be redressed she hath ways and means such as have not even kings,” and he looked upon me as if

to read the influence of his speech written in my face. "Yea," he added, "the usurper and disowner of his children must be brought low." And while I marvelled at these words, he continued, "Keep courage, my son, and visit me sometimes. Thine uncle will fetch thee." He then gave me his hand, and rode gaily on, with a side smile toward mine uncle, in the direction of a great tower more like a baron's hold—as indeed it had once been—than the abbey of a prince of God.

When the cavalcade had passed on, mine uncle turned to me and said, "There goeth thy good friend and well-wisher, my nephew. Dost thou but follow his desire for thee, thy wrong shall be avenged and thou wilt become great."

"As to that," I replied, "my wrongs are mine own, and toward that kind of greatness I have no lust." I said this bitterly, for I had no more liking for this man and his mock respect for me, than I had for mine uncle's schemes, which were but half patent to my youthful knowledge.

"How now!" he cried fiercely. "Dost thou talk contemptuously of such greatness? Know you that my lord bishop hath strong powers, such as could to-morrow topple thy father, mine insolent brother, out of these crags into nowhere, did he but persevere. Know that he hath great favour at Court, especially with the most puissant Duke of Albany, who ruleth his royal brother, and is king in all but outward seeming. Know you that such power as this is not to

be slighted, nor its friendship scorned, nor its anger courted."

Then said I, "I am but a youth and thou a learned clerk, but it seemeth strange to me that thou, my father's brother, sitting above his salt, eating his meat and taking his shelter, shouldst have secret commerce with this man, knowing as thou dost his power and hatred toward our lord earl! Dost think it human, brotherly?" I cried, and I faced him there on the sands.

At that his face went dark with a storm only his black spirit could assume, and for once I made mine uncle show his real heart in all its bitterness.

"Boy," he cried, "darest thou preach to me, to me, of brotherhood and humanity? Dost thou know me? Who am I to harbour such fine feelings, and who art thou, thou craven fool, to preach such doctrine? I have no brother, no kin, no name, save what the Church doth give me. Who is this man who calleth me brother, who treateth me less than his dogs—me whom he would turn on to-morrow did he not fear me? Am I not more fitted to be his lord than he mine, in thought, in gift, in power to rule?" And he drew himself up. "In all but one thing am I not his superior? Yet he hath all, and I nothing; and still thou wonder'st that I should hate him. Yea, so much do I hate him," he said, "that——"

At this, words seemed to fail him, so great was his passion; and the dark purple veins swelled in his face

and neck, and clenching his uplifted hands in dread menace toward Girnigoe Castle, and muttering terrible but meaningless imprecations, mine evil uncle, the holy Churchman, fell foaming in a fit on the sands at my feet. Many terrible things hath it been my fate to see in this sad life, but never saw I more terrible sight than this. I had heard dread tales of him from the castle servants, that he was one of those whom men called possessed of an evil demon ; and his looks now so horrified my spirit that I could but stand in a strange maze of terror, so much so that did not some elemental sense of humanity lead me to take courage to loosen his neck-cloth and throw water upon him, he had like to have died, which in some ways would have been for the great good of us all, though he lived in the end to do me a good turn without meaning to, as is often the way of evil men. After a while, when the water had recovered him, and whatever ill demon in him was dislodged, he came to himself and sat up, now quite pale and weak-like, and beckoned me to his side.

“Did I fright thee, my son ?” he said. “I am subject to these turns. Men evilly say that I am possessed, but thou knowest better, my lad ; ’twas but the heat of the blood,” and he opened his girdle, and, giving me a silver cup, prayed me for God’s sake to get him a taste of water. This I was not long in doing, for he looked like to go off again, and all his assurance was not strong enough to hold my courage when I remembered the dread look on his face when

in that woeful sickness. For of all the fiend looks on the face of man, the worst was that then upon mine uncle's ; and if it be possible that a demon doth, as men say, inhabit mortal bodies at times, I could fancy one did his at that time. When I brought the water he thanked me—a rare thing for him—and, taking a phial from his breast, shook somewhat from it into the water, and gulped it down as a man drinks greedily when athirst. Whereat the blood came to his face once more, and he stood up.

“Thou lookest pale, lad,” he said, with somewhat of his old manner. “Thou art not a girl to go white at sight of a sick man?”

“It was a dread turn thou hadst,” I answered, keeping my distance.

“And thou believest their lies?” he asked.

“I know not,” I replied; “but had not a human weakness seized me I tell thee frankly I had left thee to die where thou layest.”

“But sense saved thee, and me by thee,” he answered. “Boy, thou hast saved my life. Believe not those senseless tales, but rather know me to be thy best friend and the one who in this world can do thee the most good or the most ill. Hast thou no ambition but to be what thou art now, and worse, like me or others, as thou growest old?”

“I know none,” I cried, “save to some day leave this place.” For what dreams or aspirations I held in mine own soul seemed to me as too sacred to reveal to

this ill man who had such power over me, and toward whom I felt no goodwill.

"Thou art content to be as thou art?" he said, looking darkly at me.

"I know not of nor care for thy power," I said, "but hast thou no love to any at Girnigoe, not even toward my brother Hugh?"

"Thy brother Hugh!" he answered evilly. "Hast thou ever thought that he standeth betwixt thee and all this greatness?"

"This may be," I said, "or it may not; but he is innocent of any ill. He is my brother, and I think that in his way he hath a love toward me."

"In his way," sneered the priest, "and in such a way! He is but his father in the kernel, with somewhat of his arrogant mother. Yea, he liketh thee but as one of his fancies until thou tirest him or he thinketh thou standest in his path."

I feared that to some extent this was true, just enough to put a canker in my heart in this direction, and had I been of mine uncle's bitter soul, there is no doubt that he would have made me hate my brother, for he was a very devil for seeing into the defects of human nature and laying bare what was vilest there. But, as Heaven knoweth, for all my weaknesses, and I have many, I longed rather for love and justice than for revenge against any soul. Then I said, "But hast thou no regard for the lady countess?"

"The lady countess," he spake fiercely, "hateth me,

though scarce as deep as she hateth thee, whom she hateth most next to thy mother's memory in all this world. She regardeth me but as the one who represents the Church to her pious mind."

At this I was sad, for I was but a lonely youth, and I had thought that for all her pride and dislike for me she was a good woman in her narrow, religious way, and in somewhat reminded me of my mother.

CHAPTER VII

“THESE people are naught to me and thee,” continued the priest. “We are in a world apart, thou and I; but thou hast the greater wrong, didst thou but know it. Indeed, if thou didst, thou wouldst live but for its righting.”

“I know not and care not!” I cried, for I was weary of his eternal hints and dark ways. “I ken that there was some wrong done my mother, who was a good woman, and that there is somewhat of a mystery as to my standing; but are not this earth and yon sea enveloped in a mystery, which God lets down and uplifts? And so I will live and wait on His great will, nor love nor hate more than lieth in my nature.”

“But knowest thou,” he continued, “what the world saith of thy mother, and how it casteth shame on thy birth?”

“Ill of my mother? Thou art mad!” I cried.

“It is even so,” he answered. “Thy shame is that thou wert born out of wedlock, and that thou art known to the world as what is called a bastard, and thy mother as no wife.”

“’Tis a foul lie!” I cried, “thou black, evil priest,”

and I had like to have struck at him, but a mist swam before me, for it all came upon me now, and in spite of his ill face and serpent tongue, I believed him. But I put him by when the truth of his words came to me, and rushed blindly, I knew not where, with one impulse only, to get away from him and all this hideous thought. Then it seemed as if the whole world became red, and then black, and I knew no more.

When I next awoke to knowledge of this world it was weeks after. I lay on my couch in my chamber at the castle, and mine uncle Angus and my brother Hugh stood over me.

“The fever hath gone now ; he will live, thank Heaven !” I heard the priest say. Then a bitter drink he thrust between my parched lips, and I sank into a deep sleep from which I woke more refreshed but still woefully weak. They told me afterward that but for mine uncle I had been drowned at sea, as I had in my madness run out round a great headland toward the tide, which being on its return would soon have engulfed me, had not Father Angus in a sort of despair followed me and brought me back by main force. And they said that he had arrived at the castle some hours afterward, bearing me as one dead, and himself more dead than alive. That this strange man did all this, not for any love for me, as others thought, but as I knew for a stern purpose of his own, wherein I had felt from the first I was to play a necessary part, only made me fear and dislike

him all the more, for he seemed like one who would bring a soul back from the dead to carry his own bitter purpose to its end.

I have since felt what agony the man must have suffered, himself half dead with his own sickness, following me along those treacherous, devouring tide-washes, that were like to steal me, and with me his hope of revenge, out of his fierce grip. How he must have struggled, raved, and cursed till he got me home to the castle, only an aged, infirm miser, bearing his load of gold, and fleeing from the robber Death, can realise.

I was months coming back to my former health of body, but as to mind and spirit I was never mine own self again. The memory of the priest's words on the sands rankled in my heart and burned into my soul like the searing iron of the brander that marks the criminal. My brother Hugh, who at times came to see me as I lay there, remarked this great change, but laid it rather to the effect of my illness.

"Thou art older, brother Ian," he would say, "What siren of the ocean came up on the sands and stole away thy youth?" At this I would mutter and turn from the subject, for through all my hideous woe I loved him still. Careless and proud, yet he had ever the fair sunny ways and open heart of a true man. But the curse was on him, as on us all, and mine uncle Angus was as apt to read him as he read me, and to play on his weakness as he had played on mine, but to a more deadly end.

“Thou growest more like thine uncle Angus every day,” he would say to me in his light way, not knowing the real meaning of his words.

“God forbid !” I would say.

“My saintly mother and he would make a Churchman of thee,” he would laugh ; “but let them not. Thou wert not made for a cowl ; but when thou gettest over this weak fit come out with me. Leave those cursed books which have bewitched thee, and have stolen thy youth and strength. There is a devil in those black letters which mine uncle Angus pores over. I will make thee a man-at-arms and get thee a knighthood at Court, where I am to go some day when my father makes his peace there ; and we will see all the fair ladies and bold gallants. See, we be most men now.” And so he would go on, and then would leave me and I would not see him again for days, when he would come in and be very sorrowful for his forgetfulness. Toward the latter part of my illness, however, he came but once, and I noted a marked change in him. He was silent and moody, and when I asked him what was the matter, he answered with some heat, “It is all my damned uncle Angus, who would rule me as he doth my father.” He then went out, and I marvelled what new trouble was afoot.

Only once did the lady countess visit my sick-room, and that was when my weakness was at its worst and they thought I was to die. I have said that she was a very religious and pious woman, and in her way desirous

of doing good, and she thought it her duty to her soul and mine to come in and bid me God-speed. It was at a time when I was very weak, and when I was told that she was coming my heart yearned for some woman's love, as all poor ill souls do, like children that are helpless. But she came in so proud, stately, and cold, that she might have been some austere moonbeam, and she so froze my soul with her short, cold exhortations and distant manner, wherein was little warmth or human sympathy, that I was glad when she was gone. Then I realised how she and others looked upon me, as one beyond the pale of those who may look for human happiness.

The priest was my most common visitor, and he was truly desirous of repairing what he had done to my spirit, and seemed doubly anxious to get back into my favour. But he soon saw that it would take time to heal over what he had wrought betwixt us, for my one love in the world was my mother's memory, and no one knew this better than mine uncle Angus. Yet it was not possible in nature not to grow to tolerate the man who had been so assiduous, and who did so much to make life tolerable for me in my great physical illness. Besides, he saw how matters were betwixt us, and carefully left me to myself when he thought I would like to be left alone. This gave me much time for solitary thought and observation, and by this means I was enabled to make a discovery which startled me out of my sick-bed inaction, and which,

though it gave me much uneasiness, brought me out from my useless repinings to a self-forgetfulness necessary to my speedy recovery.

My room, as I have said, was a small one, in the neighbourhood of the grim tower occupied by mine uncle. It was almost square, with a heavy beamed roof, and lighted on the one side high up in the wall by a small window, such as we have in our fortresses, so that, much as I might have desired, had I been a prisoner I could not have escaped that way, so narrow was the outside opening. At times the sea air would gurgle and bellow in this window and the dim light come in, but never the sunshine, as no ray could ever penetrate. As I lay there day by day I had a good chance to study those walls, and, as sick people do, read each separate stone and beam, not excepting the floor, when one day, having noticed the corner behind the heavy oaken door, it seemed that there was somewhat peculiar about the paving which was not found in the rest of the room. This idea did not come all at once, but gradually grew upon me. It seemed that at some time the stone in that corner had been removed or was made to remove, but why, I did not consider, but put the thought away from me, as sick persons will, in a half-dreamy manner. However, the next time my gaze came to the spot in its casual wanderings, the idea rose again, and in time became fixed, so much so that I determined when my legs grew strong enough to move I would look

closely into the matter. This determination was soon followed by a desire to get stronger, and had much to do with my final recovery.

At last, one day, when I felt mine inward spirit and mine outward man equal to the task, knowing that I should be alone, I crawled out of my couch and staggered to that corner where lay the object of my suspicions. When I had steadied my head from the swimming sickness consequent on my first standing alone, I felt with my hands and discovered that the stone in the corner was a large flag or paving-stone apart from the others. I then groped for a place whereby it could be moved, and to my agreeable surprise found a great iron ring at one side next to the wall, set in a sort of mortise. I now knew that it was a trap leading secretly to somewhere, either down to the sea or to some dungeon. My desire for strength henceforth overcame all other thoughts, and my mind was full set to solve this mystery for myself. I would now stand a little every day, and walk about my room to recover my legs, as it were ; and I soon showed a desire for nourishment which surprised mine uncle and the serving-man who brought me my meals. All the while I was possessed with a fear lest mine uncle with his prying eyes should discover the trap in the dark corner. But his observation, which was limited to me and my countenance, was puzzled to understand the root of my desire to live. In this manner, I soon got strong, and began to go out in the courtyard and get

a sniff of air, sea, and mountains which quite revived me. Meanwhile I had secretly procured an old pike of strong metal, which I brought to my room, and one morning about daybreak awoke with the resolve to discover my mystery and find what was under the stone in the corner. Getting my pike and forcing it through the ring, which, in spite of its rust, I raised, I worked at the trap, using all my strength, until by degrees I had raised it so that it stood on edge, revealing to my gaze—what I had expected to see—a stairway in the living rock leading downward. Fixing the bar to my chamber door so as not to be disturbed from the outside, I muttered a short prayer, and descended by what seemed a winding stair hewn out of the rock beneath the castle wall. Soon I thought that I perceived far below me a dim light as of day. I knew but little of these matters at the time, but since have learned how these old castles had their secret passages and holds to hide in or to escape by sea or land in case of necessity. This passage, however, appeared to be one long unused, and it must have been built ages before by the founders, or perchance him of the wizard tower. At any rate, I was certain that none in the castle now knew of the trap and stairway until I had discovered it. Meanwhile, I continued to descend until I heard the lapping of water and felt a cool breeze of the sea wind on my cheek, and knew that I was near the ocean. Just then I turned a corner, and saw from the step or ledge whereon I stood a sort of window

or porthole that let in the daylight, and far at my feet a deep well or hole, where the sea washed in and out. I drew back with a shudder, for I saw it was a prison or black hole ; and, looking more carefully, I noticed that to an iron ring in the rocks was fastened a great chain which even now held part of a wasted skeleton, showing how some poor prisoner had died.

Seeing that I could not proceed farther by this way, I went back, and after turning the corner of the wall by which I had come I fancied that I perceived a dim light and heard the muffled sound of voices on the other side of the wall. Putting mine eyes to the chink or crevice from which the light came, I saw that the wall, which had given way in this place, separated the stairway I was on from a similar one on the other side leading to the tower wherein mine uncle dwelt. The voices seemed now to come from above ; but at the foot of the other stairway I could see but dimly a quiet cove of the sea in what seemed a natural cave in the rocks, where the sea washed at high tide. As I gazed the voices came nearer, and I distinguished that of my priestly uncle in earnest conversation with someone else. Now the memory of that grim rumour of him which said that he had a familiar spirit, or demon, overcame me, as I heard the answering voice ; and, what with my recent sickness and a new fear which I could not explain, my knees went together beneath me, and I had like to have fled. Overmastering my dread, however, I resolved to remain and discover

the meaning of this secret conversation, and what danger or terror it might mean to us all. Just then mine uncle came down the stairs; his face was from me, but I could see him plainly in the dim light, and after him came this weird shape his double. I had now grown somewhat in stature and mind, but for all this I was yet but a lad, and this idea of a double seemed now proved before mine eyes, and lent me a new horror to my former knowledge of my strange uncle, and it needed all my courage to abide there and watch the grim priest and that hideous demon which report said he had conjured up by the magic of his power. Perchance, as some said, it might have been the dread Wizard himself.

Mine uncle seemed much agitated by some feeling he had, for he said something in fierce tones, the words of which I did not catch; and just then the demon turned to answer, and to my surprise revealed the face and the portly person of my lord the princely Bishop of the Cattynes.

Ere I could recover from my astonishment at this new marvel, the bishop answered my uncle's words somewhat ironically. "So thine impetuous nephew hath begotten him a passion for my ward? This is news. How hath he got to see her?"

"He is a foraying and meddlesome youth," answered the priest, "and in some chance skirting by thine abbey got espial of this same dove of thine. Perchance some of thy retainers gave him word of her beauty,

for it is common talk that your Grace hath a turn that way."

"These are but base lies," answered the bishop, more warmly, "and which it little becometh thy cloth to harbour of me. She is but a child, and of high birth, higher than you would dream, sir priest."

"And hath a right royal dowry too, no doubt. Hath she not, my lord bishop?" returned mine uncle.

"That be, as is her origin, a secret betwixt myself and my puissant master the princely Albany," answered the bishop. "But thou shalt see her soon. She is but a tender blossom for this world, and as I have ever treated her with that kindness and respect which becometh her station, she looketh upon me as a sort of father, never having known any other. But this mad project of thy nephew; what thinkest thou will become of it?"

"'Tis but to carry her off, and out of thy power, and 'tis only the plan of a hot-headed boy and to be laughed at," returned mine uncle.

"Did thy rude brother my lord earl but ken her house and fortune, it might mean a different matter, and quick ruin to all our schemes," answered the bishop. "This plan of ours must be brought to a quick conclusion." Then followed a conference of a most cruel and fiendish nature, to which I was an unwilling audience, but which showed that mine evil uncle was privy to a dastardly plot to use his knowledge of the secret passage to seize the castle by entering by

the sea, and kill or imprison my father. There was much more, which it is not necessary to relate, and some of which I but imperfectly caught, though it seemed that I also was brought into the matter, and from what I could gain their scheme was that I was to become a Churchman, and the whole wealth of the family was to be sequestered in this way. But I forgot all else save the despicable treachery of my fiendish uncle, who would lead an enemy into his brother's hold and wreck his own blood for a brute hate, and I felt that had I had a weapon at the time, and him near me, I would have slain him for his infamy.

While I was turning over these thoughts, the bishop gave a sharp whistle, and a small craft, manned by a couple of men, came into the cove below, and the bishop descending was soon carried out of my sight. As I stayed there dazed, mine uncle went up past me muttering to himself unto his tower above. I wasted no time for fear that he might take it upon him to pay an early visit to my chamber, so as soon as his steps died out in the distance I too arose, and, somewhat cramped by my position, crawled up mine own stairs, hastily replaced my trap, and, unbarring my door, returned to my couch, for I felt I needed all my strength and much reflection upon this most perilous business.

CHAPTER VIII

“Arouse, my men, and arm ye cap and thigh,
We’ll ’siege this demon, seize him in his hold,
And wreck his fortunes.”—*Old Tale*.

I PONDERED long, and was much perplexed what to do, for I had no doubt but that mine uncle was determined in this project; and as for the lord bishop, he had all to gain and naught to lose, as well as an old debt to pay unto mine ill-guided father. It had also been shown me that no good was intended to myself, save that I was to be used as the instrument of their common ambition to bring about the ruin of our house. The lord bishop’s part in the matter I put aside as being but the natural rôle he would play had he the opportunity. But mine uncle’s attitude was what deeply amazed and angered me. There was no doubt that this man, one of great gifts and parts, had he seen right to put them to proper use, was now possessed by a spirit of dread revenge which ruled his life. As I afterward learned, this idea or passion had governed his actions from an early date, even when he and my father were young men such as Hugh and I now were. The wrong of his position, and my father’s

treatment of him, acting upon a fierce, cruel nature of uncommon subtlety, had warped his soul into this one brute idea, that if he could not rule he would wreck those who did—even as dreamed that great Prince of Darkness spoken of by the fathers, and who fell by his ambition. It outraged my spirit to know that a man of my blood, or of any blood, could descend to such a depth as to coin so much of learning, subtlety of mind, and years of thought, to devote them to one grim vengeance. This thought so affected me that I could scarcely tolerate the idea that this man had lived so close to me, and had actually nursed me back to life, and that not without some human tenderness. As I lay thus, pondering, the door opened, and in his silent, patronising manner mine uncle entered, and stood before me, as if naught had happened, and with a calm demeanour and unruffled brow, as though he were not at that instant planning the destruction of his house, but were some benevolent mediciner, asked me how I did.

Now it was a peculiar power this man had over me, that, hate him as I did in his absence, and even in his presence for his sardonic, evil manner, yet he had a gift of speech and persuasion, and a way of putting matters that either placed me in the wrong or else made me doubt sometimes that my ill thoughts concerning him were just. Even now, when he spoke and looked upon me, I began to doubt whether all I had seen and heard in the passage beneath were not

the creation of a mind disordered by illness, or the vision of my morning sleep ; and were it not that I could see that flagstone in the corner, and remembered his fiendish plot too recently, he would have overcome me by his bland presence and seeming kindness.

Matters had gone too far by now for me to temporise, yet I could not face this man in the open and charge him with his treachery until I had had more thought with myself. So I turned my face to the wall and said that I had slept but indifferent well. "For, mine uncle," I said, "I have had most fearful dreams, and they were concerning thee and this castle." And I turned about and looked at him suddenly fair in the face ; whereat his countenance went white, and then dark with a malicious scowl.

"Thou dreamedst of me ?" he cried.

"Yea," I continued, still watching his face, "yea, of thee ! I dreamed that thou didst lead men up out of the sea, who did burn and plunder all here !"

I got no further. He blanched as I spoke, and then cried, as though I had not been there, "Did I believe such lore, I would think that the wizard's spirit had fallen upon him." Then, turning to me, he said, "And if thy wild dreams were true, couldst thou blame me, and thou least of all ?"

"'Twere base and unnatural were it true," I cried. "The creatures of different kind war on each other, but those of a kind band together. Yea," I cried, "it were base and unnatural."

"Boy," he answered fiercely, "and what am I but base and unnatural in the begetting, even as thou art," he cried in the venom of his rage.

"'Tis a foul lie!" I answered, forgetting all else, and, leaping from my bed, faced him there on the floor, "and none knoweth it better than thou. And I tell thee I believe thou hadst a hand in that ill matter!"

Then a queer thing happened which almost quelled mine anger against him. "Ian," he said, "I can tell thee truth, that in that matter I had but one hand, and that was for thy good! Didst thou know all thou wouldst bless me for ever, as thy mother did, who was a good woman."

"It may be so," I answered; "but I tell thee straight, one wrong doth not justify another."

"Boy, thou art a fool!" he answered, losing his fierceness, perchance seeing he had gone too far. "Thy dreams concerning thine ill uncle, who hath saved thy life, have turned thy head. Thou wilt live to bless me yet. Forget thy mermen; they are but shadows. If I do not bring more flesh-and-blood creatures than the seamen of thy dreams into this castle, thou hast but little to fear from me," and he laughed scornfully. But there was a lowering look on his face as he went out that gave the lie to his words.

I now made up my mind that it was useless to parry with this man, who was too far gone in his ill-schemes to be touched by any human feeling, but that I must in some way warn the castle of its danger, for I knew

that within a few days this secret project would be brought into action, and all resistance be too late. This seemed to me, however, to be a difficult matter to manage without bringing upon me mine uncle's ill-will and devilish skill of revenge, for with all my pride I feared the man, as did all who knew him. I was therefore in desperate case how to work the matter.

But an event happened which brought me out of my quandary and saved me the trouble of unmasking mine uncle's deviltries. While I lay there my door opened a second time—this time suddenly, and in burst my lordly brother Hugh, his face once more aglow with the old-time fervour, and a new light of manliness I had not afore seen thereon.

“Rouse up, my sad brother!” he cried, “rouse thee up, and get thee ready! Forget thine illness, for I have great and glorious news. We are to besiege the cunning Churchman in his hold.”

“Nay!” I cried, and I leapt up in astonishment with a queer trembling, for this was a light out of my darkness. “Not the bishop's castle?”

“The very same,” he cried. “His time hath come!”

“When doth this happen?” I asked.

“This very even,” he answered.

“Thank Heaven!” I cried, forgetting all in my surprise and gladness at this new turn of matters.

“We will beat them yet!”

“Ho, ho!” he laughed, “thou art no Churchman

then, my clerkly Ian. Thou shalt ride with me indeed. But hearken, my sedate brother, I have other news for thine ears. We are not only to smoke out this same Church fox, but we are, like knights of old, to release imprisoned beauty. There is a fair maiden, like as the morn for beauty and form and manner. I have seen her, and dost thou know, my brother, I think that she hath favoured me by a glance? My father hath discovered that she is no less than the Lady Margaret Seton, daughter of the late Lord Seton of that ilk, who is ward to the King, whom men know to be imbecile, and who alloweth his brother Albany to keep her in charge. Now, for some purpose of his own, Albany hath handed her over to charge of this worldly bishop for safe-keeping in these northern wilds, where she had been lost, and her beauty wasted, had not I caught sight of her. Now, my father hath taken vow to release her and punish this bishop at the same time."

"But the Duke of Albany! Wilt thou not make a dangerous enemy?"

"Dangerous," he replied. "Not more than he hath been in the past! He hath an eye on the throne, and would get rid of my royal cousin Rothsay did he dare, so men say; but my father is of those who have an eye on his deviltries, which will bring him low yet, for all his climbing so high."

Then a thought struck me, and I said, "Doth our uncle know of this intended sortie?"

"Yea," he answered, "as all in the castle know what hath been in preparation for this good hour or more."

"Then will he spoil all!" I cried. "See that he hath not left the hold."

"What mean you?" answered Hugh in amazement. "He would not go so far. He such a traitor?"

"I may not speak further," I cried; "but see hath he gone." And we both hurried out into the passage, where we met the lady countess's page seeking the priest, as she desired to hold Mass for the souls of those whom she feared might be lost, for it was against her will and advice that this attack had been planned.

"Is the father not here?" cried the page. "I have knocked at his door for some time back, but have heard naught. He must be at private devotions."

"See that he hath not left the castle!" cried Hugh; and the youth, hurrying out, soon returned, saying none had gone out, as strict orders were given that none should leave the bounds, as was the custom, so that he must still be within. I had mine own suspicions, however, as to mine uncle's powers of egress not known to all; but as I thought matters were now all right, and that it could not be possible for him in so short a time to give warning to the bishop, I entered with the others into the ardour of the preparation for the coming sortie.

All within the castle and outer yard were now busy with preparations: furbishing of armour, testing of weapons,

marshalling of retainers, and selecting of others to take their places ; for those who were not to go were to keep guard at Girnigoe in case a return sortie were made in reprisal. All who could be gathered from far and near among the earl's vassals were brought in by messengers sent out early that morning. In this manner by the afternoon quite a small army were assembled with pennoned spears and bows under the walls and within the courtyard of the castle. I, like others, had been provided with armour and sword, as I was to ride beside my brother, who, strong against the lady countess's will, was bent on being in the front of the assault. Having remonstrated with him in vain, she returned to the chapel, where at the shrine of her favourite saint she pleaded for herself, her turbulent lord, and valiant son, being accompanied there by those of her women who, like herself, were religious, or feigned to be, being her followers—at least those of them who were not engaged in helping to get ready those who were to issue forth for a no less purpose than the storming of the house of a prince of the Church.

Early in the afternoon my priestly uncle came forth from his chamber, looking as if he had been engrossed in his studies, and had no more worldly aims or passions in his mind. Passing with a furtive smile the eager preparations in the courtyard, he went to his duty in the chapel. Whether he had got out of the castle in the meantime by some way he had by sea, or had sent

some message, I could not tell at the time ; but afterward I understood that he had tried to do so and had failed. If this were true it was marvellous the manner in which he hid his defeat and went calmly about his office.

When all was ready for the foray, which was to be undertaken in the evening so as to effect a complete surprise under cover of night, we were all assembled in the courtyard ; that is, all those who formed the main body of the knight's followers, who were on horses and ponies with footmen to run behind. A trumpet was then sounded, the great bell of the courtyard was rung, and the command was issued by the castle chamberlain that we were all to assemble, as many as could enter, in the chapel, there to be assoiled in case of death, or to be blessed in assurance of victory ere our going forth ; as was, and is yet, the custom of our nobles and their clans of retainers, even when issuing forth to do battle with their neighbours. Now there were some of our following who, in the depth of their hearts, were doubtful as to the righteousness of this assault of a churchly hold, so that this command to be assoiled and blessed came as a comfort to some, and a thunderclap to others, who, not knowing the inward nature of the rights or wrongs of either parties, were at doubt with themselves how far Mother Church could, or would, bless and protect those in attack on one of her high servants or ministers. However, it is not for those who serve to deliberate, but to do their

lord's bidding ; and there were men in our party who would have taken the bishop's own assoilment and have hung his very self that same night, so grim and sordid were their ideas of earth and heaven and the ruling of this sad world. Therefore, without murmur, more than men ought, who walk in a mist toward a quaking morass whereof they know not the footing, or as brute beasts who tremble in their limbs but still abide the commands of the rider, we all went into the side-door from the courtyard, and thence into the main aisle of the chapel, where, in carven stone and ancient splendour, there gloomed the tombs of the great lords and dames of my father's house.

There we stood at the far end of the aisle as though we feared to go forward ; but, for the most part of us, awaiting the command of our liege lord. I, for my part, held more wonderment than fear of this strange affair, watching to see how it would end ; knowing, as I did, that my priestly uncle was the one to have the last say ere it were accomplished.

There we stood in the central nave of the church, and at the other end, where dim lights burned on the holy altar, stood mine uncle in his priestly robes, his back to us as if in silent prayer or ghostly meditation. Below him, on the outside of the altar steps, as near as a woman may go according to our custom, knelt the lady countess and her pious women in close communion over their prayer-strings for the woes of this barbarous world.

We made in that place but a weird and dread picture and an ill contrast : we, on our part, being but a horde of wild men of blood and war, with spear and sword and bow, where the late light of day streamed through the mullioned windows, bloody with ancient scutcheons, on the grim, gross, passion-graven faces ; and opposite to us that other more peaceful, more austere group at the other end of the chapel, the stern priest and those sombrely garbed women at their silent prayers. For a moment I felt as if our entrance were rather an act of sacrilege than one of religion. But my meditations were rudely broken by a stir behind us, and my martial father, the earl, in full armour, carrying his unsheathed sword, strode forward and cried out—

“ Sir priest, as lord baron of these territories, I command you to give to these men-at-arms here assembled the word and seal of Mother Church’s benediction on our present engagement, so that they may go forth in good soul to battle.”

At this the women arose, led by the lady countess, and shrank to one side of the altar, as if in expectation and dread, and mine uncle turned him slowly about with that sardonic smile on his face, and as quietly as though addressing but one person, spake thus—

“ My good lord and brother, it were well that Holy Church knew where she gave her blessing, lest in the dark broils of this ill world she assoiled the blade that struck her own holy breast.”

“ Presumptuous priest,” cried the earl, “ thou

knowest where we go, and thou knowest why, yea, indeed to punish the unchurchly bishop of this territory under my lordship, for his unchurchly crimes, and to loosen a high-born maiden from this wolf's licentious clutches. It is for this reason we demand thy blessing on this our expedition."

"Thou knowest, my brother," cried the priest, "that it were sacrilege to bless such a sortie against the sacred person of a prince of the Church, and even thine own mad lust of conquest cannot carry thee so far."

"Brother me an thou darest, thou foul bastard!" cried the irate earl, "and I will unpriest thee with this blade," and he would have advanced, but the lady countess stepped forward.

"My lordly husband," she said, "forbear to add to thy many sins that of Cain, and that at the foot of the altar. Hearken to me, thy wife, and go not forth on this ill attack on the Church of God."

"Madam," cried the earl, "my time is but short, but I say to thee, that I go not forth against the Church, but for the Church's good, to punish one who hath unchurched himself and foully usurped the place of a prince by his arrogance and love of worldly powers. I go not against a holy father, but against one who hath taken upon him my lordly functions in this mine earldom; who hath meddled with my vassals, collected my tithes and fees of feud, as belonging to me only, as this foul priest, my brother, well knoweth."

"'Tis false!" cried mine uncle; "and if thou darest come but a step nearer I will hurl the curse of Holy Church on you and yours, so that ye go forth to damnation for evermore."

"Nay! nay!" cried the lady countess, "curse not, he will relent!"

"He shall do this or die!" cried the earl. "Away, woman!" and pushing the lady aside he confronted the priest at the altar steps.

"Now, false priest," he cried, "I give thee but three turns of the hour-glass in which to come to my bidding and bless these men, or thou wilt be a dead priest and past all cursing for ever."

At this the lady countess shrieked, the women screamed in terror, and even the soldiers around me shrank back in dread of the deed about to be committed; and indeed it were a dreadful one were it to happen, as against a brother, a man of God, and at the foot of the altar, for few of them knew as I did the real ill-thoughts and deeds of mine uncle Angus. It also seemed to me that the priest in his bitter malice would dare the worst, even his own death, to foil the man whom he hated worst in the world. Now, knowing this, and how important it was to us all that such a dread crime should not be laid at the doors of our house, and that it was necessary also to check the proud bishop in his career, I felt it about time that I also took a hand in this matter, for, lad as I was, I knew that I held a power of knowledge over my priestly uncle

such as would make him come to our terms. So I plucked up what courage I could muster and stepped forward.

“My lord earl,” I cried, “wilt thou let me speak but one word to mine uncle ere this matter be decided ? ” At this the earl turned on me.

“Boy,” he cried, “thou ? What hast thou to do with me and this man ? ”

“But too much,” I cried, “as my sorrow knoweth, but methinks that if I have one word aside with him he will grant us his blessing.” At this all were astonished save the priest, who merely looked at me and then lowered his eyes. But the earl said, “Say what thou likest, boy, and if thou hast any foolish kindness toward yon Church hound, better say it quick, for his moments be short.”

“My moments be as short as Heaven may make them,” answered the priest.

But I hurried to his side and clutched him by the sleeve, speaking in a low tone, but fiercely, in his ear.

“This is no time for madness,” I cried, “thou must give this blessing, and let us begone, at thy peril.”

“Thou fool, thou weak fool,” he answered fiercely, “thou hadst better leave plotting to thy betters,” and he made as though to shake me off. But I would not be put aside in this manner.

“Look here, mine uncle,” I cried, “I am no man’s fool, much less thine, thou perjured priest. I know thee and thy grim soul, and dost thou not give us thy

blessing, and let us go peaceful on this errand, I will tell aloud in this presence my dream of this early morning of thy leading men from the sea up into this castle to murder and plunder thine own people." And I looked him straight in the face, and plain as were my words, he read that in mine eyes which showed him clearly that I knew all, and had him and his schemes at my tongue's end. He knew also, as I did, that did I reveal this dastard act of his at this time, death would be but a gentle punishment to that which he would receive at my lord's hands; and I have since thought that it was not fear alone which gave me my hold of him in this case, but a sense of pride which the man had, which, while it allowed him to do this deed in secret, could not stand the disgrace of its being known. At any rate, he seemed as it were to wilt and shrink up into himself, then, thinking a moment, he said in bitter tones, "Thou marplot, thou seemest born to be my curse!"

"Quick, sirrah," I cried, "wilt thou do this, or I speak?" and I straightened up as if to carry out my words, when he said quick and low, "I will, but thou shalt rue this hour yet." And I knew that he meant what he said.

"Do it, and quickly," I cried, and I went back to my place. During this short discussion of ours the earl had been striding up and down.

"Well, sir priest?" he cried. But even now, when he had to come down from his defiant stand, this clever

man did not seem to give in to us, but rather to make us feel his condescension.

“My lord earl,” he answered, “brother I call ye not, all that thou canst force from me in mine office as priest, I give to thee as by power of carnal strength, but as man to man I tell thee no good can come of this matter, but seeing that I have to do mine office, I fulfil it not of mine own will.”

Then commanding us by action of his hand to kneel down, we all obeyed, the wild earl and his grim war-hardened followers kneeling there in good faith to receive that blessing from Heaven which they had compelled at the hands of this grim priest who blest us, if bless he did, in his polished Latin and cursed us with his eyes.

It was a strange scene and long remembered by me, though one but too common in our age, when Church and State are both corrupt, and at constant strife with each other in struggle for that power which they both desire to tread down and imprison the minds and souls of the common people.

During all this time the lady countess had bowed herself in much grief and terror in front of the altar steps, in attitude of one who looks on rather with horror at a sacrilege than of one who taketh part in an act of blessing. When the words were at last uttered which gave us the Church's authority to go on our expedition, the grim earl rose up from where, on one knee, sword in hand, he had remained to receive, rather

as a right than a boon, the churchly assoilage; and turning to his followers, cried, "Now to horse, my men, that we may speed to our work, and make short shrift for this foul usurping bishop!" With that we all arose and poured forth from the chapel, and in a short time after were riding forth from the castle wall, turning our faces in grim battle-mood in the direction of the churchly hold of my Lord Bishop of the Cattynes.

CHAPTER IX

“There is no height to which his soul soared not,
No dark to which it did not deep descend;
But when loud battle’s wrack and ruin roared,
He made a wondrous end.”—ANON.

“Ambition, worldly ambition, thou sayest!
It filled his churchly heart till Death assoiled him.”
“*The Cardinal*,” a Drama.

IN telling this tale of my life, it hath been my one aim to keep direct to those matters which led up to the gravest tragedy of all, but if memory tricks us by false mirages of the past we are but mortal.

It seemeth to me that this life of ours is but a sort of sleep or dream, a trance in which nature hath steeped us, as men are drugged by poppy fumes; and that in this dream men spend their whole existence, the playthings of a few geniuses, who, more than the ordinary, are wide awake in matters pertaining to life, and who by their power over others rule this world.

How true this may be, at no time of my life did I seem more wide awake to the affairs of this existence than on that night, when we issued forth from the gates of Girnigoe, and yet when I again entered those same gates, it seemed that all my life before with its

care and boyish sorrow had been but a foolish sleep from which I had awakened.

Many a party of armsmen had ridden out from those grim gates for their own weal or woe, and many on as grim a project, but I doubt me if there ever had been so much difference of opinion on the merits of the case in which they fought as we held then. But whatever their thoughts, they rode, or walked, or ran, as the case was, under the darkness, as became good vassals of a great lord, content to fight under his banner, leaving to him and his the blame and scathe, so that it went not so far as to ruin their own souls. Many of them had fought so many feuds, and in so many causes, that it mattered little who the foe was, if there were but promise of booty and carousing at the end thereof. Then so grim were the punishments of traitors and deserters, that these men would as soon have defied the King himself, as go back from the direct order commanded by such a lord as my father.

It was a wild northern night, with some promise of coming storm, as though the very elements were in sympathy with the stormy, turbulent passions of men, as we wound along that bleak sea-waste, keeping close inland so that no spies from the bishop's hold might see us and give the alarm.

The bishop's castle or keep was a great building, much added to of late. It had been at one time the tower of a robber-baron, a scion of our family, who had given my ancestors and the peaceful inhabitants

much trouble and uneasiness, both by sea and land, until, so tradition said, he was captured and burnt in his own tower, to the delight and relief of all save himself and a few turbulent retainers who shared his life and death. This castle stood at some little distance from the sea, and it suiting the bishop's plans, he had got it granted for Church purposes on pretence of founding a monastery, and had added to and strengthened it, so as to make it a rival in some ways to my father's hold, not only annoying him, but making his own vassals a terror to our retainers, who dwelt in the neighbourhood. Around this keep, in a sort of glen or strath, there had gradually grown a small village or group of huts of the meaner sort, which were the dwellings of the bishop's people, who like parasites lived upon that to which they were attached. To reach the hold we had to pass through this village, where we found the dwellings wrapped in repose, as of those who sleep in safety, having no fear of enemies. Now it would have been better for the bishop had he been more wary, and less secure in his own self-conceit, and that he had held a greater fear of mine unhappy father. In which case he would have been on his guard. The truth was, he had been led through intercourse with mine uncle to look with a high contempt upon my father, and to regard him as one rather fearing than to be feared. To this might be added the great power the Church believed itself to hold over the superstitious minds of men, so that it were con-

sidered eternal damnation to a man's soul to attack the Church or her vassals, no matter what the provocation might be. Even the Church in her conceited sloth hath been led to see of late that this fear of her groweth less and less, until there be many of us who come to think such superstitious ideas to be confined to foolish women and children frightened by old monks' tales. As it was, this midnight foray of ours, though it struck at first a shock of horror through Scotland, had much to do with killing the superstitious fear of the Churchmen as a class beyond the reach of carnal weapon and worldly punishment for their sins.

As it happened, the proud bishop, being filled with his own schemes of invading our castle, had little dreamed that a counter attack was so near its execution, so that he was caught like a rat in the trap of his own conceit.

Leaving our horses close at hand in the charge of footmen, who in case of repulse were to await us, or in case of our being out-numbered were to secure them and come to our aid, the larger party of us approached the outer gate of the keep, which, owing to the trust of the bishop in his own security as a Churchman, was without a drawbridge, and was held only by a wooden gate or portcullis which was raised or lowered at need. As it happened, no enemy being expected, and the men-at-arms being otherwise employed, or more likely asleep, the gate was left in charge of a drowsy old sacristan or warder, a Churchman himself,

but of a sort too common in these days, where the Church goeth no further than the garb, and the inner man is but vassal to drunkenness and sloth. This old man being stupid over his cups, heard not our approach, and at our demand for entrance to see the lord bishop raised the portcullis ; then seeing us to be so many, was so terrorised at our appearance that he incontinently ran screaming for help. It was but an instant ere, with a loud shout of triumph and hate, our party invaded the castle.

Now I know not how it was, whether the sight of that poor, cowardly old priest or the real sacrilege of the thing overcame me, or the shrieks and yells of the surprised denizens of the place, or that it was the first feeling that all have on entering into an act of human destruction ; but my heart forsook me with the will to take part in so wholesale a carnage as now ensued. By this time the bishop's armsmen had assembled themselves and were making a brave though unhappy defence of the place. Hugh, who had been at my side when we entered, had hurried on in the van of the attackers, and shoved aside, as those are who will not advance, I soon found myself in a small alcove of a sort of entrance where the moon shone through in the shape of a cross on the stone floor. All about me and in front was forsaken and desolate, for the assaulting force had swept all before it and had disappeared into the upper and inner rooms of the castle. I could now hear the clash of arms and the yells and curses of men

in mortal combat, where the onset was all on one side, like to wolves who have caught their prey; and on the other that grim fierceness of men who fight in a desperate case for life itself, and sell it at as dear a price as nature will afford them. All this noise and sound of battle sickened me into a nausea of the whole matter, and a horror that men could do such things, and I made up my mind that I would go forth and have naught to do with work which seemed to me to be the action of demons rather than men. So I drew my blade to defend me did I run into an ambush, for through all this the sense of self-preservation seemed to stay with me, though I feared naught for myself, for the horror of the whole business was one which overcame all other feeling. I left the alcove, and was feeling my way out through the dark passage which led to the outer gate, when on a sudden I heard a cry far above me in the centre of the castle, where the fight seemed to me to be the dreadest and at its height. This cry came to me as that of a child or woman, and there was somewhat in the sound as of the voice of one in deadly fear or despair, which went to my heart and drove out all other sense but that of terrible indignation and pity. Turning my face, I retraced my steps inward with all the speed I might through that dark and gruesome place in the direction whence that sound came, and there was that in my heart which made me feel that if even the earl my father or my brother Hugh had stood in my path betwixt me and that

beseeching voice, I had cut my way at the expense of all, even life itself.

Following after that pitiful cry there had come a great yell as of triumph, and then all was still for a moment, then the noise of carnage seemed to revive in other parts of the castle. Feeling my way under stone archways and up great stairs past dead or wounded men, who groaned feebly or cursed me as I went, or beseeched me for aid, I hurried along, watching lest I should slip on the pavements wet with blood in places where some life had gone out. Thus I came at last to a great doorway through which a light shone, and stumbling over many dead bodies found myself in what was the great dining-hall of the place. It was a room long and high, hung with great escutcheons and armour. At the far end was a huge fireplace with ancient arms carven in stone in the wall above. Down the middle ran a great table, and at the lower end near where I stood, a crowd of my father's men were huddled together as if in a maze. Some of them were wounded, and they all were bloody and much breathed with the recent fight. Here evidently at the door the worst of the fray had been, for the bishop's men had chosen this spot for their last stand, and lay in great heaps of dead on the floor of the passage and the entrance to the hall. I forced my way past these men, who stood sword and spear in hand as if arrested and waiting for some matter to happen, and saw in front of me, in a space below the table, my father and three of his men,

their swords wet with blood, while at their feet lay the body of the Bishop of the Cattynes clothed in armour neath his churchly robes, stretched prone in death, and beyond the body, where all could see her, like some proud animal at bay, stood a young girl of fair and noble beauty, who seemed by her attitude to be partly beseeching and partly scorning the brutal crowd who stood before her. "Ye have committed foul crime against Holy Church, and ye have slain my father, evil men," she cried, as I gained the door.

"His daughter! Ho, ho! his daughter; more like his leman," cried the earl, his passion not yet abated in spite of the deed he had done. "Take her away or slay her."

"I dare ye to touch me," she answered, but her face was like snow for whiteness, and she clung to the table for support, and I saw that for all her pride of demeanour and defiance of these terrible men she was in great inward terror. The men hesitated, for with all their gross natures there was somewhat about this maid which made them fear to touch her.

"She is yours!" cried the earl. "Bishop's leman or bishop's daughter, 'tis all one!"

I saw that he was mad with the fight, or he would have seen that it was no common girl who stood before him, and he must have clean forgot in his savage ferocity the pretended reason for this whole assault, namely, the rescue of the fair lady now before him. Also her grave defiance, and her naming the bishop as her father, had

angered and blinded him, so that he did a dastard and brutal thing in leaving her to the will of those evil men.

“Sir earl,” I cried, “stay!” but he laughed a harsh laugh and turned to me.

“They shall not have her,” I cried, striding forward. “Dost thou know——”

Whereat he interrupted me, “And dost thou want her also?” he scoffed. “But I forgot, thou art also a power with the Church. Thou beginnest young, but thy proclivities are of the right sort. Thou shalt have her, canst thou get her. Bishop’s leman to priest’s boy!” and with a scornful laugh he ordered his men out and strode after, leaving us alone. I had now time to observe her more closely as we stood there in that place of greatness and carnage, the dead bishop lying betwixt us, and I noticed that though she tried to hold her bravely up, she looked as though she might swoon. I felt that we stood in a strange relation, and that, as the castle was filled with cruel men bent on spoil and pillage, her case was a desperate one. As I looked at her our eyes met, hers at first scornful and brave as of one in ill case and unyielding, and mine wondering at and pitying her fair beauty and girlish defencelessness.

“Lady,” I cried, “fear me not, I will not harm thee. But tell me truly art thou not she whom men call the Lady Margaret Seton, ward to this same bishop who now lieth dead betwixt us?” She looked at me doubtful, and then seeing that I offered her no hurt, said, “Whoever thou art, who knoweth me, thou

art over young yet for such sacrilegious butchery," and she tried to speak me with scorn, but I noticed that there was a quaver in her voice that savoured more of tears than of pride.

"Lady," I answered, "think not that this is of my will, though my father hath good cause of feud, as I well know, against yon dead man."

"Then thou art his son?" she answered quickly, eyeing me with a new scorn, born of the knowledge of the relationship and somewhat else, as I was soon to learn.

"I would but aid thee, lady," I cried eagerly.

"Aid me?" she cried. "And 'tis thy fool ambition for a girl's hand that hath caused all this ill and death. Aid me, sir? Thou hast caused trouble enough. Thou art but a sad and an evil wooer."

"I know not what you say, lady," I cried. "I never heard of thee but twice before, and am here but to save thy life."

"My life, such as it is, is in God's hands," she answered.

"So it were, my lady, but a moment since, when save for mine intervention thou hadst had an ill fate," I answered, for it angered me to have her scorn and doubt me. Then I continued, "Why didst thou call thyself his daughter?" and I pointed to the bishop's body.

"He was as a father to me," she answered, "and all such that I have known in this world."

"Thou wilt have a friend in me, lady, wilt thou but

come with me," I said quickly, for I heard men coming our way, and was afraid for her did she stay in this place, and I was also not sure what my father might do did his mood change.

"With you, sir? Wherefore should I go with you, sir? And yet I know not what to do except to die. Oh, sir, if you would but lead me somewhere where a good woman were, for I am a poor girl."

"Lady," I cried, "canst thou not believe me that I would only protect thee. I came with this party, but had naught to do with the slaughter, for I have a horror of all this," I cried. "See my sword, it hath tasted no man's blood."

"Then thou art no warrior and but a poor protection," she cried.

"Nay but, lady, as I was going out in hate of it all I heard thy cry for help, and I could not but come."

"Thou heardest me cry?" she answered; "the cowards! They said he was an ill man, but he was good to me."

"Yet I tell you straight," I answered, "that for all that he well deserved his fate."

"Sir!" she cried.

"Yes, lady," I answered; "but he is dead, and thou art in danger. Let me take thee to a place of succour."

"I know thee not," she answered; "thou lookest honest and kind. But where wouldst thou take me?"

"To Castle Girnigoe," I answered.

“Dread Heaven!” she cried, “not to the place of the lord who hath slain him.”

“And why not?” I cried. “His countess is a good and pious lady, withal somewhat proud as thou art, but a great woman and a good guardian for such as thee.”

“Am I never to be mine own mistress?” she said, and the tears coursed down her pallid cheeks.

“Wilt thou come?” I cried, for I feared to stay longer.

“An thou art true to me,” she cried, “an wilt be my friend, I needs must, but ere I go wilt thou promise that he shall have decent burial?”

“Though he were a bad man, my lady,” I answered, “yet because he was friend to thee he shall have decent burial, as becometh a Churchman.” Then she knelt by his side, folded his hands and kissed his brow, and I marvelled at the presence of mind of this young girl, so slight of body and so delicately nurtured, having the spirit to hover over this dead man who little merited all the love and reverence she paid him.

Just as she knelt there I heard a sound behind me, and turning saw a big man-at-arms of our castle, one of the earl’s braggarts, who was feared by many, and whom I hated and dreaded above all the castle servants. He came rushing in with his sword drawn, having no doubt stayed behind in search of plunder. So soon as he saw me and the lady he rushed forward and would have seized her, when I sprang at him.

“Stand aside, my cockerel,” he cried, “and let men have their spoils,” and he glowered at me. “Come, my fair maid,” he said, “give me those jewels that thou wearest, and a kiss of thy lady lips. The good bishop is dead, he will need them no longer.”

At these words, spoken by this rude man in her presence, and to her, there came over me somewhat of that feeling of power and command which I had had even as a child, but now as a more manly impulse.

“Touch her an thou art a dead man!” I cried, while the poor lady rose from where she knelt, and shrank over by the table, with a wild horror on her face.

“Ho, ho! and thou wouldst have her, my sprouting, left-handed lord,” he cried, and he laughed in my face. But the man was a fool when he offered that insult to me. I had been man enough even for him, great hulking swordsman as he was, for I had determined to die ere he should harm her, but at this brutal affront from his base lips, and in her presence, all seemed to leap into fire in my brain. There came a mist before mine eyes, and I had but one impulse, to slay. My sword seemed to leap in my hand; and when I came out of the mist, there lay the base brute dead, his head split open, the bloody sword still in my hand, and the maid in a dead faint beside me. Then all seemed to come back to my mind, and with it a new sense, that I was a lad no longer, with a boy’s far-off fears now dead and gone, but was now a man with a man’s strength;

and a lover, for had I not slain my first foeman, and that to save her whose safety seemed to be the one thing in the world to live for. Sheathing my sword with a fierce joy, I lifted her in mine arms and bore her forth, deathlike as she was, with a dread fear in my heart that her eyes would never open again. With her in my arms I strode down those dread stairs, past those dead men and all that rack and ruin of midnight battle, with the river of life in my soul, and after some missing of my way and stumbling came to where the man was who kept my horse. Soon I was riding through the murky night with that loved burden toward Girnigoe Castle. There dismounting at its gates, I bore her in, and laid her, still in her faint, with much reverence at the feet of the lady countess.

CHAPTER X

THE assault of the hold and the murder of the Bishop of the Cattynes resulted in much ill to many at Castle Girnigoe. Of the lord earl, men said the doom of his house began at that time; and in truth the worst that hath come to us since took its rise from that deed. Some considered the earl not to be in his right wits afterward. How true this may be, I, who am not over-superstitious, have thought that the over-indulgence of a mastering passion of revenge or hate may produce a madness in the mind, and certain it is some such fate overtook my misguided father. The castle people, however, charged his illness to the dread curse that the bishop had laid on him ere he died, for it was told me afterward how that singular man made his end. It seemed that, taken sudden in his self-confidence, he retreated to his dining-hall, his faithful men-at-arms defending the entrance thereof unto their death. Then my father entering, sword in hand, and a look of relentless hate on his face, the trapped bishop first pleaded for his life, then seeing that he spoke to no account, drew himself up, stood on his churchly authority, and, cursing the earl and

all his with curses such as only Churchmen can coin and use, met his death like a man. But a worse ill came to my father in the horror of his deed that went throughout the north, alienating from him many who formerly were his allies in common cause against the encroachments of the Church, but who now regarded his act as one of direct sacrilege too great to be condoned.

The greater danger and menace to the earl was to come, however, from the grim hate of his cousin Albany, whose agent and friend the bishop was; and had it not been that this prince's policy was rather to lie in wait for his enemy, he would instantly have brought an army into the north and have burnt my father out of his hold, so greatly was he incensed when he heard of the bishop's death. There was, however, much other care and sorrow in the fated walls of Girnigoe as the result of that evil sortie, the effects of which were felt during the week following, and to some many a day after. For there were some dead, and many of our men wounded, among the latter being Hugh, who in his impetuous spirit, having not a little of the earl's character, which became from this out more apparent, would be at the head and thick of the attack, where older and stouter men than he went down. Being also eager to rescue her, whom by a strange fate it came to be mine, the laggard's, lot to have to serve, he was hewn down by a sword-stroke and buried under a heap of dead and wounded. Being found afterward, he was brought to the castle a little later than I had

reached there with the lady of his romantic quest. That he was not mortally wounded was owing to his having been buried under the others, and to the sword having missed its sure stroke ; so, with his youth and vigour, it was not long ere he was up and about, as reckless and impetuous as ever.

The condition of her, however, who was to make that castle for ever after a happier place for me was my chief thought. But beyond the terrible ordeal, such as many a lady of quality in our times hath been fated to undergo, she was without scathe, and grew in time to forget the horror.

I will keep to the day of my death the memory of that night's ride, with her in mine arms, along the murk of the sea-beach to the castle of Girnigoe. How I was given strength to do what I did that night is not for me to understand, save that some souls ordinarily weak have their supreme moments, when the spirit so conquers the flesh that the will is all-masterful. It seemed to me as if I saw naught but that sweet pale face, which might never put on life again. Thus in this elated dream of action I bore her into the castle hall, where the lady countess stood, with one thought in the world, her son Hugh.

"Hugh, is it thou? Thank Heaven!" she cried, and this cold, haughty woman started forward in mother gladness, for she thought it was her son. We were alike, and in this new mood of mine we were perchance more so in her eyes, and she was deceived.

"Nay," cried I, "it is I."

"Thou! only thou! and where is my son, my Hugh?" she cried with a bitter cry. But I laid the lady at her feet, and said, "Madam, quick, save this lady ere she be dead!" But she only turned on me in hate and scorn.

"Thou! only thou!" she cried. "Thou traitor! thou hast brought the lady, and my son is dead!"

"Madam!" I cried, for her selfish mother-love jarred on me, while the young girl lay there so cold, in what might be death, "hast thou no feeling? See, she is senseless. Canst thou not pity her, the victim of all this horror? They murdered the bishop before her eyes!"

"How now!" she cried. "The bishop dead? Oh, my husband! Oh, dread Heaven! Then Hugh also is dead! 'Tis the curse!" Then she turned on me. "And thou? Didst thou dare live?" And so great was her anger I thought she would have struck me; but I forgot her rank, and cried sternly, "Thy son is not dead, madam; quick, thy women! or this girl will be——" and I knelt at the maid's side, but the lady countess put me away. "Begone!" she cried, "thou art not worthy, thou supplanter, thou Jacob!—dost thou think she is for such as thee?"

"Madam," I answered, "I have but saved her life, and thou wilt lose it again."

"She hath no ill," she answered; "'tis but a swoon; see, she cometh to now; but my son, oh! my son!"

At this the Lady Margaret began to revive, and opened her eyes, to my happiness and pleasure to see those lights of my heaven appear again. But they wandered in sad amaze, and she moaned piteously. Then she tried to gather herself together and to stand up.

“Where am I?” she cried. Then she remembered, and looked at me and at the lady countess. Then she said, “Sir, thou didst save my life.”

“Lady!” I cried, “this is the Countess of the Cattynes. Then she turned to the lady countess, and said, “Oh, madam, wilt thou protect me?”

“Thou need’st no protection in Castle Girnigoe,” cried the lady countess; “thou art safe here. My lord and my son make no war on women.”

“Yea,” answered the Lady Margaret, “this thy son did save me,” and she put her hands to her face, as though to hide the remembrance of what she had seen. Then the lady countess showed her hate and scorn of me.

“This is no son of mine,” she cried, “but a vassal. Did he save thee, lady, he did but what his mean life was made for, as servant to this house.”

“Not thy son? Not thy son?” cried the Lady Margaret. Then she looked at me in amazement. But she read in my face what checked her further speech, and she turned to the countess, and said, “Madam, I am ill.”

“Quick!” cried the countess to her women, “wine!”

The lady is indisposed." And the wine was brought. Then I knew that I was not wanted there, and turned sadly and reluctantly to go.

"Sir!" cried the young lady, "let me thank you." Just then a man-at-arms entered.

"My lady countess!" he cried, "God save you—here cometh the Lord Hugh, who hath been grievously wounded!"

"My son! Great Heaven!" cried the lady countess. "'Tis the judgment of Heaven!" Then she turned to the young girl and cried fiercely, "And 'tis for thee, for thee, he hath suffered this! I could hate thee for this!"

"Madam," cried the girl, "I am innocent in this matter!"

"Nay, but thou art cause of all," cried the lady countess; "'tis for thee that all this great sin was committed; for thee that the good lord bishop lieth dead, and that my son is all but dead."

But the poor girl only moaned, "I am innocent! I am innocent!" Whereat I could not see her suffer, and I cried, "My lady, this is not so! I know somewhat of this matter. 'Twas an old hate betwixt the lord bishop and the earl which hath caused all this, not yon innocent girl."

But the lady countess turned on me in contempt. "Thou! thou!" she cried. "What dost thou here without my bidding? When I send for thee, then mayest thou come. Thy duty was but to serve my

son ; and whilst thou wert about thine own affairs he hath come by this hurt ! ” The young girl turned from her to me in mute wonder ; and, as I thought, with a sort of scorn in her eyes that I could not brook. “ She seeth my shame,” I cried to myself, and had it been a man who had brought this dishonour on me in her presence, and not the lady countess, I had answered ; but she was a lady, and I felt in my heart that for many reasons I had no right there now that my work was done. So I hung my head, and in shame and sorrow took my departure. I know not how I got to the door. The whole world seemed to gloom down on me, but I felt my way to the lintel. Then it was that my overmatched strength found its end ; for it had been a part of mine exaltation which had given me power to slay that man and to save her, and when that and my hope went out, my strength was gone also. I got me out of the doorway, and just as I felt I had lost her for ever I came face to face with mine uncle Angus.

“ Well, my mighty fool-slayer and saver of maidens ! ” he cried in his sardonic manner. Then the castle spun round and all was dark.

CHAPTER XI

IT was many hours before I was myself again, but youth outlives the greatest ills that attack body and soul, when time is young and the roads of life ahead. Though I awoke to remembrance of the lady countess's scorn and insult, and to the fact that a great gulf of station and power lay betwixt the King's ward and a poor outcast youth of no wealth and of but doubtful origin, yet I could not but dream of her whom I had been fated to save from ill scathe and perchance death, and whose presence now stayed with me sleeping or waking. Thus it was that I, Ian, the outcast, scorned and ill-treated, arose from my bed with a new lease of life, and, it must be admitted, with but vague dreams of the future. For I was a fool, as the young ever are, and would not look the hard fact of the hopelessness of my love in the face. I was soon, however, to be disenchanted, and brought to a true sense of the world of distance that separated my existence and hers. The one to do this was the man I feared and hated more than ever, now that I had foiled his ill schemes, and had dared force his hand at a time when he could ill brook to relinquish his vengeance.

He read me like a book in this my love-dream ; for though I had not spoken to him since, yet my act of saving the Lady Margaret, and how I had ridden through the night with her and brought her half dead to the lady countess, were the talk of the castle. She herself had also told of how I had slain the serving-man, she not knowing who he was, except that he was a great brutal man and one to be feared. Now this man had been an important person in his place about the castle, though not having many friends on account of his overbearing manners. But when a man is dead, folk often forget his ill-deeds and remember his virtues, or, what is the same thing, imagine some for him, often canonising a veritable scamp into some sort of remembrance and even veneration. So it was with this fellow, and though I was more respected for my physical prowess in sending him to his account, yet there were some, and they had their sympathisers, who muttered at my act, seeing that it was known that I had not gone wilfully into the attack upon their foes, but had had the temerity to slay one of their own comrades. To this was added a sort of disagreeable surprise that one who had shown so little liking for the practice of arms should exhibit such proficiency as to overpower one of the greatest braggarts in the earl's train. All this caused me to be avoided even more than of old ; yet there were not wanting some who were my friends, both through pity for my position, which was known under the rose, as it were, to be a false and unjust one ;

and also because of mine act of daring and humanity in saving the young lady and ridding the castle of a brute who was a good riddance.

Among these latter was the castle armourer, a bluff, hearty man of a good presence and an honest, open nature. He came of a race of armourers and smiths, and loved his craft, as one should who values the making of a fine blade and a solid shield to withstand it. Now it had been my habit often when lonely to go into his smithy, a sort of cell in a lower corner of the castle, and to watch him as he worked at his forge, wielding with one arm his massive hammer, which he used so dexterously as to temper the keenest edge of a blade, and yet with the same to strike a blow that would have felled an ox. At times he would teach me some of the secrets of the skill of his craft, and I even came to handle the hammer and to work with his tools in a small way myself. The sword with which I had slain the armsman had been fashioned for me by the good smith himself, and he was proud to think that I had made such good use of it, and had been so apt a pupil. For he was in addition somewhat of a swordsman, skilled in the use of weapons, especially the broadsword or claymore, used with the two hands, and he had had much doubt as to my power ever to become very proficient in the art of war.

Thus were the castle people divided into two factions, for and against me, of whom the greater part were against, as the lady countess's strong dislike for me

was well known, and acted in my disfavour with the most of them, as it ever doth where underlings love or hate, praise or dispraise, as their superiors show the example.

Now mine uncle, like the deep spirit he was, saw all this at a glance, and used it against me to my face and behind my back, not by any word he said, for he was a silent man, but he had a way more certain and powerful than words by which to convey his meaning, or extract knowledge through those channels which his ghostly character gave him. Therefore, though he had had no intercourse with me, yet he was as well aware of my feelings toward the Lady Margaret, and as deeply cognisant of my unhappy position, as I was myself.

It was on the day after that he paid me a visit in my room, where I was musing betwixt a half-dream of fancied hope and a despair of mine unmended fortunes. I would rather have had his room than his company, and I was not slow to let him see that I was of this mind, for in the mood in which I then was, mine own thoughts, or rather fancies, were my most welcome counsellors, and I dreaded that this cold, ill-thinking man should probe my secret and make sport in his polished cynic manner of what I felt so deeply. So I said naught, and waited with some cold impatience for him to explain his reason for intrusion, which he must know would be most unwelcome.

But, as I have shown, he was not one to stop at

trifles, or to waver for scruples of pride where his schemes led him, so he took but scant notice of my lack of warmth, and treated me as one would a spoilt child.

"Well, my martial hero, and rescuer of maidens," he said. "'Tis a good and meet beginning thou hast made for a future son of Holy Church!" Now I liked not this, his taking for granted, what he knew I disowned and hated, namely, that I was set apart for Orders.

"I am no Churchman, as thou well knowest," I answered in sullen manner.

"And is it thus that thou rewardest my faithful clerkship, thou runagate!" he said. "I will yet show thee thy proper path as thy best friend."

But I was determined to have done with this dream of his for ever, and to show him the folly of his hope, so I said roughly—

"I would have thee know that thou art either mad or worse, to think that I am inclined for Orders. I have neither love nor ambition toward that vocation which thou fillest so bravely," I said scornfully.

"Boy," he answered, with that quiet, maddening smile of his, "'tis thine only path in life. Thou must walk it, will or nil!"

"Thou liest!" I cried in petulance. "There be other paths in life."

"Yes," he answered, "there are others, such as armourer's apprentice men, or as follower of such as

thou slewest ; but thy pride will not take them." And he looked at me as a spider might look at a poor foolish fly, buzzing on the edge of its web.

"Thou devil!" I cried. "Why dost thou come with dark counsel and ill-looks to haunt me with thy sneers and pretended pity, when I know thee so well. Could I not open up thy deviltry to the whole castle, even to my lord earl, and ruin thee for ever?"

"Yea," thou couldst, he answered, "even to my lord earl, thy loving father!" and he sneered as he said it. "But thou wilt not. I know thee too well for to fear thee," and he laughed in my face, that light easy laugh of one who is master. "For," he continued, "with all thy hate of me, and of my schemes, thou lovest thine uncle just enough, and thy house a little more, so as to keep thy tongue quiet in thy head."

"Then why dost thou not leave me to myself?" I cried, for I had other thoughts and wearied of his presence.

For a moment he went dark in the face, and was near to losing his wonted composure ; for his pride was greater than even mine own, but he conquered himself and said sternly, "Thou fool, for fool thou art, know that I, even thine ill uncle, hath a certain love for thee ; and that thou hast some grain of talent which might make thee worthy of that greatness which I have in store for thee."

"And what might that be?" I questioned, just to sound him.

"Even as a prince of the Church, thou ingrate,"

he answered, and I saw that it was a sincere dream he had. But I had no mind for his ambitions, and I answered, "Sir priest, I have neither the gift nor the spirit for so lofty a place. But why, if thou lovest such things, dost thou not, who art fit even as I could never be, aspire to such a position thyself. There is this same bishopric of the Cattynes even now vacant. Wert thou not the chosen friend and confidant, as I well know, of that present martyr and late prince of the Church who hath departed? and why dost thou not, if thou hast such power to set a poor lad as I am in such place, set thyself there, who art the more worthy to fill it?" Now this was a long speech, but I fancied though he hearkened to me with patience that I had hit him in a sore part of his pride or secret ambition, and I also noticed that he found it hard to give me a fair reply.

"'Tis a difficult matter," he said, with more of hesitation than he had yet used.

"And why?" I asked.

"There are other considerations," he replied, with his eyes down.

"And may I ask," I cried, looking him hard in the face, "what be those remarkable considerations which make it so fit for a poor youth such as I am to fill a great position for which thou art not available?"

"I may not answer thee in the matter, thou couldst not understand," he said.

"Nay," I cried, "thou wouldst treat me as a

child, with thy cunning contriving Church ways. Thou wouldst fain father me for ever. Now I tell thee straight, I have no love for thy schemes such as they are, and less love for Mother Church's preferments. I would have thee understand that I am no more a boy, but a man, with a man's love of freedom, and a desire to carve mine own way in the world. So henceforth I would have thee know."

"And that thou scornest my counsel and friendship?" he returned fiercely.

"Yea, if you will," I cried.

I now thought he would even have offered me violence had he dared, for the man had no limit to his passions, but to my amazement he sat down at the foot of my couch and calmly spoke, marking his heads of debate on his fingers in mock importance, as if deriding me.

"And this young springald," he said, "hath outgrown his pen-feathers. Being tutored by his poor faithful uncle for the vocation of Orders, he hath become proficient as a clerk. But having invaded a monastery at the murdering of a bishop, he hath slain a man, and rescued a maiden, which matters have done more to hasten his manhood than all mine ill-training could. Have I not been his one friend in this castle? Have I not nursed him, tutored him, and all for naught? 'Tis a world of ingratitude, where fools forget their benefits."

"Sir priest," I cried at this, "have you ended this mummary? I would be alone."

“How now!” he cried. “You! you! to me! Nay, I have not done, thou fool! I have just begun.” And he stood up and paced the floor. “Thou hast scorned me, thine only friend in this cursed castle, who brought thee here, stood thine insults, tutored thee, saved thy life, and thou scornest my aid to the one preferment thou canst gain in this world. Thou! without position or name. Thou dost this, and why? Because thou art a fool, and hast caught sight of a fair face of a young girl, who is naught to thee, and can never be; and also hast had the misfortune to have committed sin by taking a life.”

“Enough!” I cried. “Thou hast said enough, by Heaven!” and I faced him.

“Is it not true?” he asked, with his cold, cynical glance, and I was so surprised at his reading my secret that I could not answer him for the moment. “Yea,” he proceeded, “and more, thou fool, have not thy fond dreams taught thee that thy love for this girl is impossible?”

“And why impossible?” I cried.

“Dost thou not know who this girl is,” he answered in scorn, “whom thou hast cast sheep’s eyes upon?”

“The King’s ward,” I answered quickly.

He turned on me like a flash. “Who told thee that?” he said sharply.

“It matters not, ’tis enough I know it.”

“Ha, ha!” he sneered in his scornful way, “but it is a keen cockerel after all, and a right ambitious

one, indeed. And might I ask thee, thou great unknown, how thou art to accomplish this brave alliance ? ”

“ I have not considered it,” I answered in defiance.

“ Nay, thou hast not considered it,” he answered. “ Perchance I have for the first time put it into bold thought for thee. But thou hast looked on her, held her, dreamed of her ; perchance even kissed her fair lips.”

“ Thou devil ! ” I cried, “ I will kill thee ! ” for the man’s brutality overmastered me for the time.

“ Nay, nay, I ask pardon,” he returned. “ I forgot that thou art monkish enough to stay at that ; but thy dreams have carried thee further. Thou hast been fool enough to allow thyself to worship and to get thy heart entangled by a bit of fair soft flesh, sweet eyes, and glistening hair, which is as far out of thy reach as the sun at noonday.”

“ Art thou done, thou croaker ? ” I cried, hating him the more for the truth he had told me, for I knew that he delighted in this destroying of a sweet hope in a human soul, as men say Satan loves to kill hope and purity in the spirit of a man.

“ Nay, not until I have cured thee,” he answered. “ ’Tis a bitter medicine, and thou hast but tasted it yet, but for all thy fierceness thou wilt thank me afterward.”

“ Never ! ” I cried. But he, as though I had not spoken, continued—

“ Hearken, thou proud fool, and I will show thee

what thou art, and what thou hast done : first, when, as thou knowest, I had dreams for the vengeance of Heaven on the ill-doer, and for thy high advancement, thou didst spoil my work and foil mine undertaking. Further, thou hast slain a man of this castle, and made thyself a foe of many of the in-dwellers, so that it will take all mine energies of thought and speech to keep thee here with a whole skin. Next, thou hast saved a maiden's life, and betwixt us two it were better that the man-at-arms had had her, for all thou wilt have of her, or of her wealth and state, or fairness of person. For what is the end of all the great toil but to give power and happiness to the earl thy father, yon proud countess, and chiefly thy brother Hugh."

"My brother Hugh!" I said. "What meanest thou?"

"Dost thou not know? Art thou so blind to all about thee that thou dost not see that the proud countess hath as well as wedded this caged beauty to thy brother, who, as all know, is deeply enamoured of her already."

"Thou liest!" I cried when I heard this; but I said it more in anger and despair than with any conviction, for both he and I knew that it was all too true.

"Now see what thou hast done," he continued. "Instead of avenging thy wrongs on this house, as became thy proper spirit, thou hast balked my vengeance and thine, and hath fool-like risked thine own life and

made bitter foes, to give her, whom thou must love in vain, into the arms of thy brother Hugh."

When he said this last I felt as if all life were leaving me. What if it were true, and what evidence had I to disprove his words? For, to tell the truth, he had never, so far as I knew, told me a direct lie, though he had fooled both me and himself by bundles of half-truths.

"Art thou sure of this?" I cried; "as thou hopest to live and die, tell me true."

"So sure is it as that thou livest and lovest beyond thee," he answered. "Think no more of her. She is as good as wedded to thy brother, whom thou lovest so well. Would Heaven he had so well requited thee."

"What meanest thou?" I said. "What of my brother?" For in spite of all I loved him, even though he was somewhat careless of my presence or absence, but this was because of his up-bringing, to be more thoughtless than I; for a more true, knightly, and single-hearted spirit than my brother never lived.

"Thou canst not make me hate him," I cried, "even though this last and worst cometh betwixt us." Yet I felt as I spoke that all henceforth could not be the same betwixt us if this were true, for the great tragedy of nature worketh wrath in the hearts of men for ever.

"Thou wilt yet see," he cried, "I am thine only friend. Who else careth for thee that thou be alive or dead? But take mine advice in this matter. Have no more thought of this girl, she is thy brother's who

hath sucked all the honey and sunlight of this ill world."

"Leave me!" I cried. "Leave me! thou hast spoken true! I am a fool," I almost sobbed, "I can stand no more!"

"Think on the Church, my son!" he said as he went out. "'Tis thy one hope and haven, as it was for me."

I waited until he was gone, and then down on my knees by my couch I prayed Heaven to help me bear this great passion, to forget this sweet dream that had filled my heart, also that I might not grow like this dread priest, into a veritable Cain, and come to hate my brother.

CHAPTER XII

MINE was but poor comfort in the days that followed. All my past interest in life seemed to have left me, and I cared only to ponder on my position, and anon to obtain a secret glimpse of her who had laid this glamour on my soul.

There was much care and bustle in the castle for some days. Our dead had to be buried, and our wounded cared for, so that few had time for thought. There was, however, much anxiety to know what the result would be at Court, where the fierce Albany would be sure to take revenge upon us in behalf of his dead ally and friend.

There also went a rumour through the castle that the earl was mad. He took it into his head at times that the bishop was with him, and he would leap from bed or table, and cry, "See to it that he is dead! There he lies!" and such similar words, which made the castle folk quake, and fear that the bishop's spirit walked to punish his murderer. All of this, together with the dread of Albany, gave the lady countess much grief and anxiety, so that she rarely left her chapel, where she spent her time fasting and praying, seeking

forgiveness for her lord's sins. Here was I also sometimes led by another feeling than that of religion, though I must say that this love for a girl in a young man's heart savoureth much of religion itself. But did I have hopes of catching a glimpse of that fair face, it was but a vain fancy, and I was punished for my pagan thoughts, for I never got a sight of her, save at a distance, when she came or went, veiled in deep mourning for the dead bishop. During this time I was left much to myself, being as it were forgotten. Even the priest, since our late interview, seemed to shun me, as though he thought that if left to myself, and suffered to see the madness of my dreams, I would come by degrees into his way of thinking. But love hath a thousand ways of beguiling its victim, even to the getting of a sort of sad pleasure out of its misery. I would sit in my room, shut in by my grim lonely walls, and live over and over within myself those moments of that night which I would never forget, and build my heart up with the thought that I had been the one to save her. And I would wonder if at times she might think of me, or even in her dreams remember her preserver. Then would come the memory of the priest's cruel words, I would recall the scorn on her fair face, and my despair would conquer all else.

There was one place on a parapet of the castle wall where the watchmen were wont to keep guard, and where it had been my habit to go when I desired to be alone, taking with me a black-letter book when

the days were fine. Here I would now crawl up and watch for a chance sight of her, and not many days after I had been there I heard a sound of trumpets, saw the warder let down the bridge, and soon there appeared my brother Hugh gaily caparisoned, and by his side, riding on a palfrey, a figure which, though veiled, I knew to be hers. Thereafter they would ride out, day after day, followed by an armed escort. I saw that this was a purpose of the countess to throw them much together, and thus bring about her desire.

This went on for some days, until it made me sick with envy, for I could see, from where I crouched, that Hugh with his gallant form, fair face, and impetuous spirit of youth and gaiety, was one well suited to a girl's fancy; and every look of his and glance of hers went as a dagger to my heart. At times I would wonder that she never inquired for me, and it seemed strange also that Hugh did not notice my absence, or come to see me, and I soon began to fear that the seed of that hatred, which the priest so desired, was planting itself in my heart. But an event soon occurred which shamed me of such ill dreams. One bright morning Hugh burst into my room, in a manner more like his old self.

"Ian, thou morose dog," he said in his light way, "thou must come out of thy cell, or we will think that thou hast a plot to turn the castle into a monk's hold. The sweetest lady in the world hath asked

after her preserver, and wonders why he so shutteth himself up."

"And she hath asked after me?" I cried, but I had to hide mine agitation, and the words came out in so constrained a manner, that he, in his impetuous feeling, deemed me an indifferent bookworm.

"Yea, she hath, thou mole!" he answered. "And proud thou shouldst be of such a condescension on the part of this fair princess; and, Ian," he added, coming closer, "I am but a sad fellow myself, and an ungrateful hound, not to have before this thanked thee for thy brave deed in rescuing her." And he held out his hand as though to take mine. I saw that this was but more proof of his open, kind nature, and yet if all life had been at stake I could not but have felt angry at his seeming patronage of mine act, as though he were already her owner and I but a dutiful vassal.

I gave him my hand though but coldly. "It were naught," I managed to say, "it is but what thou wouldst have done thyself," but I said it in no kindly spirit.

"Yea," he answered, "thou art but a spiritless fellow, who doth not value thy good fortune. If it were in me to envy thee, I would almost do so, that thou hadst the chance to save her as thou didst. Who would have thought it in thee?"

"Thou hast no reason to envy anyone," I answered with some bitterness; whereat he gave me a wondering look for a moment, then he said, "Come, sir monk,

the lady hath sent for thee, we must not keep her waiting."

"And what may she want with me?" I asked sullenly.

"Want?" he answered, "my sad brother, 'tis fact enough that she calls for thee. No more is needed. Thou must come!"

But what could he dream of my feelings? I would have given worlds to see her face again, to hear her speak, to touch her hand, yet I feared to meet this girl, so much to me yet so far out of my reach, and belonging, as I bitterly thought, to this youth, my father's son.

"I will go," I said shortly, with a rapidly beating heart, and I followed him out.

We found her upon the castle wall, attired in her riding garments, waiting for her palfrey. And I who have since seen many a beautiful and high-born woman, have never seen so fair a picture as she made there that afternoon, as she stood waiting for us, gauntlet in hand, by the castle wall. I could not keep my eyes off her, as if I were a blind man recovered and for the first time feasting on God's sunlight, for such did she seem to me.

"Fair lady," said Hugh, "this is thy monkish defender, and he little deserveth thy regard, though he so nobly hath earned it. Had it been I who had so earned thy favour, thou wouldst not have had to fetch me!" and he bent, in his high and gallant way, on

one knee and but touched her hand with his lips, while I seemed to see the sun as it were a drop of blood.

“I doubt it not, my lord,” I heard her answer him, “so now to keep my favour, see you that they keep me not long in waiting for my palfrey;” and the mist now being gone from my sight, I saw that she gave him a sweet smile, and dismissed him as a princess would her courtier. Then we two were alone, and she turned to me, and I thought I caught a look of pity on her face as she offered me her hand in a proud and distant manner. I affected not to see it, and only bowed low, for I could not trust myself to touch it, and said, “My lady, my brother said that thou hadst sent for me.”

“Thy brother?” she said, in some wonderment, looking me full in the face for a moment.

“Yea, my lady,” I answered in the same cold tones, but it seemed that my intense regard embarrassed her, for her eyes went down and she drew back.

“Sir,” she said, “I owe thee more than I can ever repay, for thou hast done that for me few men would have done; and I would in some sort give thee token of my regard for thy deed;” then she paused, waiting for my answer, but her words smote on my pride. What cared I for reward? Not all the wealth of the world could give me compensation when she herself was out of my reach. But I had to answer her and check my fiercely beating heart.

“Lady,” I said sternly, “I require no reward.”

"Yea," she answered, "thou art, I am told, wedded to Holy Church, and a scorner of women and women's rewards;" but she added, with I thought some touch of raillery in her voice, "thou seemest, however, over-great a swordsman for the vocation of a priest."

"Nay," I cried, "there are those, my lady, who have no choice in this sad world, but are doomed to a certain life from their birth. Such am I."

"Forgive me, sir, if I speak plain," she answered, "but I see that thy life here is not of the happiest. Perchance you love solitude, but if you desire preference or means, Margaret Seton hath much which she needs not. Speak, and it is yours."

"Lady," I said sternly, "I require not riches nor place. I am beyond thine aid."

"Sir," she answered, "I meant it but in kindness."

"Yea," I cried bitterly, "and thou thinkest that thou canst pay me like any hireling for what I have done."

"Sir," she said, "I see that my thanks are but ill valued," and she turned to go.

"Stop, lady!" I cried, "I meant not to repel thy thanks, but I will have no other reward save thy kind words, which are more to me than all thy riches and power."

"Thou hast pride," she answered. "I had not thought this of you."

"'Tis all I have left, if thou wilt pardon me," I answered.

"I had but thought to aid you," she returned, "but it seemeth I may not. Wilt thou not at least take Margaret Seton's gratitude for what thou hast done?" and she again held out her shapely hand.

"You are far beyond me, madam," I answered, not seeming to see it. "I am outside thy world," and I again bowed low. She started at this, and then drew up as if offended at my audacity, and said, "Well, sir, let it be! I have been mistaken," and she turned from me and leaned over the parapet. It was my dismissal, and I knew that I deserved it, for my pride had been but a poor answer to her kindness. Yet I had to fight for myself and my brother; and in my poor place what else could I do? I should have left her then, but I stood there rooted to the spot like one with no sense of will. I noticed every turn of her figure, the curve of her neck, her fair head with its high-born carriage and delicate beauty; and I yearned for the power or the freedom to kneel at her side, as Hugh had done, and kiss her shapely hand. But I had no right to do this, mine honour told me, and my pride would have that or naught else in the world. There I stood, fool that I was, like some clown biting my nails; when she turned her about, and in a proud voice said, "Sir Churchman, wouldst thou find for me what delayeth this gay squire of mine?" Then with a start and a blush I bowed low and left her. But I noted that for all her hauteur there was, as she faced me, a trace as of tears in her eyes.

CHAPTER XIII

IT was soon an assured fact throughout the castle that my brother Hugh was about to be betrothed to the Lady Margaret Seton; and the lady countess, though she redoubled her prayers and penances, went with her proud head even a bit higher. Every day, as I saw from my solitary place, my brother and the Lady Margaret rode out together; and from her actions I fancied that the lady herself seemed to have forgot her trouble, and to have taken on somewhat of gaiety, though it was with but a modest and subdued air, for she neither perked nor made much of herself, as is sometimes the manner and mood of some of her sex, but was ever quiet and pensive in soul, and even when she had served me out, as my harsh pride deserved, had done it as an angel would, and far beyond my deserts. I grew to know every look of her face and turn of her form, and remembered each sound of her voice, and in safety too, for they never so much as looked up or turned my way. For why should youth, pride, beauty and high station pause to think of such as I? It soon came to my mind, however, that I was a great fool to go on thus, and it were better for

me to leave this castle, where only shame and misery were my part, and where I was barely tolerated as one whose presence was but a penance to others. I began to think me of the wide world, and of my chances if I went to the wars, or found my way to the great Court at Stirling. In this mood I would go below to my friend the armourer, who would, if busy, let me aid him in his toil, or if not too busy would tell me old tales of my house, or of other great houses, of brave soldiers of our people from the great Bruce down; tales that set my blood a-tingling, and boded but ill for the hopes of mine uncle Angus. At other times his tales would turn on legends of the castle, and I would try to question him, among other matters, as to the history of the old dungeon I had discovered, where I had seen the sad remains of some dead prisoner, but he always seemed to avoid this subject, nor could he be brought to speak of my father.

“The deeds of the lord are the lord’s,” he would say, “and the power his. We are here to do his bidding, and not to talk him down. He hath power to sear eye and slit tongue, be they false or free, and it behoves us to carry us according.”

One day, however, when there was a lull in our speech and labour, I was astonished to hear a groan, as of one in pain, under the floor of the smithy where we were working. I started at the time, but he acted as if not to have heard it, but when it was repeated somewhat louder some time after, I said, “Master

smith, what meaneth that noise, as of one in pain, which seemeth to come from the stones where we stand ? ” “ ’Tis the prisoner,” he answered, as if it were but a common matter for human misery to find a voice in the pavement whereon he trod.

“ The prisoner ! ” I cried, and he saw that my wonder would not thus be satisfied, so he sat down, and said, “ Sir clerk, thou canst not but know that in great castles like this there must be such places. Great lords have enemies, and enemies do ill deeds. Those deeds must have their punishment, so that we have dungeons and cells wherein folk spend their lives, as is right, for their folly in fighting their betters. Know you that ’neath where we stand is such a dungeon, and in that dungeon is a prisoner, a great chief of a people of the west, who hath long been, he and his, stern foes to the earl and his house. For years he strove with our people, and gave them much scathe, let our blood, and we his. He was, and is yet, a proud man, of an old line, and carried matters so that he would have had the advantage for ever ; but he hath a cousin, who is his rival, a mean man of that stripe who sell their kin, and this man who now rules it in his glen, sold his kinsman into our hands. He lieth there now like an old rusted sword, though scarce past his prime, and there he will stay till he dieth, because he scorned the lord of the Cattynes, and hath a liar for a kinsman.”

“ And doth this poor soul dwell here all this while ? ” I asked in some sense of horror.

"That he doth," he answered. "'Tis ten summers and winters, come Yuletide, since he was housed therein. But it seemeth me, by his manner and look of late, his tenantry will be but short now."

"You mean that he will escape!" I cried.

"Yea," said the armourer, testing a blade with his thumb, "by that one last gate we all must go."

"Thou dost not say he is dying?" I cried.

"And why not?" he answered. "Death is better than life in such a place." And I answered not, for I remembered the sight of the dungeon I had seen, with the skeleton in the chains. Then a thought came to my mind, "Hath he never tried to escape?" I cried.

"Escape!" he answered. "He might as well try to fly to heaven as to escape. Thou hast not seen his cell." Then he spake more sternly, "Thou hast discovered a secret, sir clerk, that few here rede of, and which were worth thy life and mine didst thou prate of it. The lord earl, yon grim priest, the hound thou slewest, myself and thyself, are all who have known of his presence since he hath come."

"This be a dread matter, master smith," I answered, "and adds not to my happiness to know that so much misery can be so near our rising up and lying down. Can men's hate go so far?"

"'Tis a grim world," he answered, "and when thou numberest so many winters as have gone over my head, you will think less of such matters. I have sometime

had such feelings myself that have shamed me, especially when I see this man and his stern unbending pride but I must needs do my lord's will. He is the enemy of our people, and would not scruple to do likewise to us did he get us into his power. 'Tis our law of life."

"But were not death preferable?" I said.

"Yea, I have thought as much myself," he answered, "but then there is the thin thread of hope while there is life, and he hath only of late given it up. When thou first camest here his friends had made an attempt to get word to him, but it failed, and the rescuer got but short shrift."

"Was he killed?" I cried.

"Dost thou remember the day thou camest into the yard that a man was shot on the wall?"

"Next to one other scene I will remember it to my death," I cried. "It seemed but an ill omen to my coming."

"'Twas his foster-brother," continued the armourer, "and but a grim work he made of it. He was the third."

"And since then?" I asked.

"Since then there have been no more."

"Could I see this man?" I asked.

"See him! Thou art mad!" he answered. "By certes, nay! Thou knowest more than is good for thee now, without 'dangering thy neck and mine! But my forge cooleth, and this good blade must be

tempered." And he forthwith fell to his hammering and would say no more.

But this gave me much grave and ill thought. I would lie on my bed at night and think of that poor soul chained to his rock in a living death. Then memory of my trap came into my mind, and what I knew of the under castle, and I wondered how far I might look into this man's place of ill abode. But somewhat else took place that day, which as it hath to do with my life in the castle I must not forget to relate. For some time it had been my habit to elude my meals at table, and, having little care for food, which was a foolish madness of my youth, but regarded by others as a proof of my churchly spirit, I went not much into the dining-hall. However, either my brother Hugh or the Lady Margaret had looked into my habits, or perchance the countess herself had some compunction of conscience toward me, for word came to me in my room by a servant that my presence was commanded at the hall table, and with some unwillingness I obeyed the order. When I entered the hall, where all were seated already, I perceived that there was somewhat amiss. All were there in their places, just as of old, save that next to the countess sat the Lady Margaret with a veil partly over her face, and opposite sat Hugh with little of heaven in his countenance. At the head of the table was my lord earl with a face like a thundercloud, who said naught nor ate more, but drank deeply in a moody silence. None

noticed me as I took my place next to mine uncle Angus, just above the salt as had been our custom, and below the others just far enough to be in or out of the conversation as our superiors willed.

The priest with a dark look grumbled in mine ear, "Well, thou hast got back to thy common-sense once more." But I noticed him not, being busy looking to get a glimpse of the Lady Margaret, who, with more of shyness than I had expected, stole a look my way, then catching my glance, withdrew hers in a haughty manner, and directed her attention to her food.

Whatever appetite I may have had now left me. It was but a poor meal, where all sat, my lady countess in her place, looking as if expectant of some catastrophe. The lord earl alone, at the head of the table, drank and drank and muttered under his beard. The lady countess ate but sparingly of some convent food, and spake in low tones to her ward and guest, and now and again to my brother. The priest said naught after he had addressed me, but watched my father the earl, as if expecting something to take place. Thus we made our meal in but ill spirits toward each other, and I could not but feel on seeing my noble father, who was little better than a madman, and my grim uncle with his evil glances, that there was after all but little remove from the misery there present and that of the poor soul chained to his rock in the cell below. Then my mind reverted to his condition, and it added to my dislike of the priest to know that

he could be privy to this torturing of a fellow-creature all these years, he being a Churchman of sane mind, whereas the earl was never in knowledge of anyone very long at a time. We had sat there for some while in this grim silence, and I had begun to think it about time to make my exit from a scene in no way pleasurable to me, for the whole position I occupied was one of inferiority and semi-degradation, when on a sudden the earl rose from his seat, and, dropping his flagon, stood pale and trembling, staring and pointing in horror and rage at some object which he seemed to see, but which was invisible to the rest of the company.

"Ho, ho there! a chair! a seat for my lord bishop!" he cried. Then he said, as if speaking to some person, "Comest thou back to daunt me?" Whereat we all started from our places in horror at the dread scene, and of the retainers some fled the hall, and others stood still in terror, many grim men putting hand to blade, as the only means known to them of combating a foe, fleshly or of the spirit. I had thought that the Lady Margaret would have swooned where she sat, but the lady countess partly supported her, and stared in horror herself at the look on her lord's face. The priest alone sat in sombre silence, his dark smile regarding his brother without either fear or pity.

"See ye him not?" repeated the earl; "there he standeth! Ha, ha! Thou foul ghost, comest thou to front me?" And he regarded the empty air as one who seeth a corporate presence.

My heart froze within me at this, for the earl had that horror in his looks, attitude, and voice, as of one who confronts a dread enemy not of this world, and his agony lent itself to the company all the more that we did not share in his sight of the invisible apparition.

Then the countess showed her great fortitude of spirit, believing as she did in the supernatural aspect of this visitation.

"Sir priest," she cried as with an effort, "in the name of Heaven exorcise this ill fit from off him; or if it be a demon, drive it from our presence!"

But the priest stirred not. "Madam," he said calmly, and his voice as he spake jarred on me, "'tis but a fit he hath, sent as a visitation of Heaven for his great sin of sacrilege. 'Tis but air he looketh upon, where his mind tormenteth him for his ill deed. Vex him not, 'twill soon pass."

But this did not comfort the countess, nor the rest of us. She muttered somewhat about heresy, and took to her beads, while the rest of us sat in dread expectancy, for the earl still stood there and held speech with some invisible presence.

Then something took place which we had not looked for. The earl, still keeping his gaze on the invisible, said in stern tones, "Bring me my sword! I will slay him again. I will show him that I am master." But no one of us stirred. Then he spake that which made us all wonder, and turned me as it were to stone with amazement.

“Ian! My son Ian! My sword! Fetch me my sword!” But I moved not at first because of my amazement. Then he repeated it again, and there was a cry of pathos in his voice. “Ian my son, dost thou not hear thy father?” At this I could stand no more, and I arose. At this the countess stood up, her fear gone, but her rage terrible to look upon, and said, “My son Hugh shall go!” Then Hugh, all in amaze, as I was, stood up. But the earl cried out, “Nay, none but my son, my son Ian, shall do this!”

All stared in wonder, and the lady countess, casting on me a look of intense hate and scorn, said, “My son Hugh, attend thy mother!” Then she said, “Sir priest, thou wert right. This is indeed madness. I may not stay here, it is not fitting!” And signalling to the Lady Margaret and my brother to follow her, she prepared to leave the room. Then the earl turned, and in voice of thunder commanded her to stay, and as he spake the words fell before us in a deadly swoon on the floor of the hall.

CHAPTER XIV

THE dread visitation which had come upon the earl was but the beginning of an illness which was ultimately to bring him to his death. There were few in the castle but believed that it was a supernatural occurrence, and it added to other ills a certain gloom and horror not to be shaken off. Were it not that our retainers and followers had no better place to go, they would have fled the castle, for the terror caused by this awful visitation was strong upon them all.

As for me, I had left the dining-hall with but a sad heart, for I felt that the earl's attitude toward me would, despite her churchly conscience, cause the countess to make my stay at Girnigoe but a short one. In this I was right, for I had scarce reached my room when I was followed by a page, who brought message that my lady countess required my presence at once in her apartment.

Now I was but low in spirits with the whole matter. My life in the place had come to a pass when I cared little what became of me. So it was with a proud and indifferent air that I went to answer her summons.

She had that cold, hateful look on her face as I entered, and had I feared the result I would have read my doom written there.

"Thou hast stayed here over long to bring woe on this place, and shame on a great house," she said. "This madness of my lord's to-day hath made it necessary that you should leave this castle, where in all properness you should never have stayed."

"Madam," I answered, giving her pride for pride, "I came not here of mine own free will, nor have I stayed with any degree of happiness or pleasure, nor is it fault of mine that I have been used with despite in these walls, which had been in right mine own."

"Ho, ho!" she laughed scornfully, "who hath filled thy mad brain with this lying folly? Dost know what thou art, and how such as thou are despised and a standing shame to their own kind? Dost thou know that——?" But I stopped her.

"Madam," I cried, "spare me the rest. My soul hath been seared with thy scorn, but you shall not insult the memory of one who is a saint in heaven!" and I faced her fiercely. "Whosoever the sin, it was not hers, and thou showest little feeling to upbraid me, the innocent victim, with what thou callest my disgrace. Nay, nay! let me go! This is no place, as you truly say, for such as I. The world is before me, and I will seek that kindness amid strangers refused me by those who are mine own kin." And I turned to go.

"Stay!" she cried in anger; "thou art insolent

beyond thy years and place. But, as thou sayest, thou art not to blame for thine ill-getting; therefore I will see that thou hast a proper vocation suiting thy birth. The priest who hath had charge of thee telleth me, however, to my sorrow, that thou hast no love toward that vocation which thy sad origin should turn thee to; that thou hast a worldly pride toward carnal aims and hopes; but these thou must forget, for it is my desire that you should, so soon as I can arrange for you, enter a Church house."

"Madam," I cried, "this may not be! Were my birth all you would make it, I am still mine own master, and no churl, to be done for as though I had no will. Weal or woe, I am no Churchman, but am willed to be a soldier and see the world. Thou hast had no love for me, and you shall have but little will in my fate. I leave this castle this day."

"Nay but thou shalt not!" she said fiercely, changing her mind, as if angered at my determination to go. "Thou shalt not leave while I have will here, save to be whipped as an insolent from its shelter. Till then thou shalt stay as a menial within its walls."

"Hang me and thou wilt, lady," I answered, "I will leave here this day."

"Thou shalt smart for this insolence!" she cried.

"I have but one death to die," I answered. "I am not afeared!"

"There are worse punishments than death," she answered, with a dark look.

“Yea, my lady, there are,” I answered, “as this castle doth witness,” and I thought me of the poor prisoner beneath. Then I looked her full in the face, and said, “Madam, thou canst not keep me here !”

“We will see to it !” she cried haughtily, and without another word I turned and left her.

Bitter were my feelings as I made my hasty preparations, with what little I had to carry into the outside world ; for I made up my mind that go at once I must, having been far too long in this place, where not one would regret me, and where I would not have one soul to say farewell to on my departure. I had got my little all into a bundle, and had taken down my sword to buckle it on, when all at once the thought came to me that there was a soul in worse case than mine in the castle, and that it was cowardly to go away without trying to do somewhat for him, for it was an ill thing to leave this poor creature in such a place when I might be able to bring him some hope even in his dying hours. It would not take long to make effort to succour him, after which I could take my departure.

My blood was up at once at this idea, and remembering that toil needs nourishment, and that if I chanced to find where he was caged, food would be an essential to his wants, I found my way to the buttery, where I got some supplies such as would make a good meal. I brought them back and ate what I felt I needed ; then, barring my door, I removed my trap and descended.

I now knew my way, and had somewhat more to expect, so was less nervous than on the former occasion. The situation of the cell I expected would be on mine uncle's side of the wall, where I had found the opening, so I decided to go with care so that he should not become aware of my object. Coming to the opening, I used a small iron instrument which I had made in the armoury, and soon removed enough to allow of my passage without causing any great suspicion. This done, I hearkened for a moment, and hearing naught, took my iron tool with me, and with some effort crawled through, and soon stood in a passage or stairway similar to the one I had left, leading up, as I suspected, to my uncle's tower and down to the water. As my object of search drew me downward and not up, I turned that way, and soon found mine eyes greeted by a sense of light, and a smell of sea air which caught my nostrils. Down and down I went, and soon found me in a small cavern where the sea washed in a deep emerald-green pool, and high up at one side, along the rocks, there lay some sort of small craft for navigating the water, similar to what I have since learned were used by the fisher-folk and by men of the Western isles. It was made of wicker-work covered over with tough hide, and seemed so light that it could easily be put in the water or taken out. I now understood how the bishop had come and gone, and how mine uncle found his means of egress and ingress. Turning this over in my mind, I now began to look about for

the abode of the poor prisoner, which I judged by my knowledge of the plan of the castle and the position of the smithy to be somewhere in this vicinity. That it was close about high-tide mark or thereabouts I made up my mind, as it would be similar to the cell on the other side. This would keep the prisoner in constant dread of being drowned, a kind of torture I have since learned to be very common in these underground sea-walled prisons of our coast holds. I soon came to a bit of wall at one corner which shut off my passage, and I resolved to try if this were the place, for I was sure that there was no entry from this part of the stairway to where he was kept. I paused a moment, and then tapped on the wall with my iron. There was no answer. I tapped again a little louder, when I was rewarded by hearing the rattle or clink of a chain, or somewhat like it, upon the other side. My heart beat wildly, but recovering myself I looked for a part of the wall weak enough on which to make my attack. I soon found a spot where the stones seemed crumbling with age and moisture of the sea air, and here I commenced mine operations. At first I found it hard to remove the stones, but after a bit made an entrance to the inner wall, which, being loosened, soon rewarded me by falling inward so as to leave a fairly large opening. As the wall went inward with a considerable noise I was startled, and feared lest I might be heard by others and my work discovered, and I well knew the penalty that would be mine. But there was much wash of

the sea on the lower walls, and up into the cove below, which deadened any but a considerable sound ; so I stood for a moment to listen, when from the inside of the opening there came so sad a moan that it made my heart curdle to hear it, as though it were a voice from the dead rather than from one living. At this a strange dread came over me, of what I should see or meet on the other side, so I paused a moment, and then called, "Who art thou who crieth ?" There was silence for a space, and then for answer there came, "Is it thou, Roderick ? Ha, ha ! hast thou come at last ? Winters and summers have I prayed for thee, that I might see thy face, and strike thee dead ! But 'tis too late ! 'tis too late."

"Who art thou ?" I repeated. Then once more came the voice guttural and wild, now strong and then at times weak, "'Tis the wind in the glen I hear, and the voice of my Morna calling me at morn and at night to strike thee dead, thou false kinsman, Roderick !" Then the voice ceased, and there came the rattling of chains as if the effort to strike were spent in physical rage.

"I have come to deliver thee," I cried. "I am thy friend."

"Friend !" answered the voice. "I have no friend save memory and the sea's voice, which hath spoken to me and hath kept me in mine own mind all these years. Stand before me, Roderick, thou fiend ! till I send thee to thy doom."

I could bear no more, so I crept through the opening, and found myself in a small cell hewn from the living rock, save on the side where I had come in. It faced on the sea-wall, where the tide, now high, washed at my feet, sparkling and green with a faint gleam of light that entered from under the outer wall.

Before me and above, where the water lapped on a rude ledge or shelf of the rocks, chained by a large rusty chain to a great ring in the cavern wall, lay, or rather crouched, what seemed to be an old man. He partly rose at my approach, his wild eyes sunken in his gaunt face, like two expiring torches, and his matted hair and beard grizzled and unkempt, and in a half moan and half growl menaced me with his manacled hands. We gazed at each other for a moment, then seeing that I bore no food, and looked not like his ordinary jailer, he turned on me with a sort of pathetic wonder, and cried, "Who art thou? Art thou a spirit of my youth come to haunt me?" and there was that about the whole man, a courage of strength and pride, that stood out through all his rags and misery, and his hideous condition, which had lasted all those years, and which sent to my heart a great pity, and a fierce rage of indignation that such a one should have endured all this at the hands of mine own kin.

"Ha! I know thee!" he now cried. "I ken well thy face. Thou art the spirit of that Ian of my youth, that Ian of the Orcades, not yon devil who rules overhead and chains me here, but that other older, but

false self of his, who was the friend of my youth, who dwelt with me in my far western glen, which I shall see no more, who stole my sister's heart, soul, and good name, as the sea wind stealeth the bloom from the flower, and then left her to die in a far-off place in her sadness and shame ; yea ! thou art that very one, and could I but get at thee, I would crush thee as ocean wrecks a weed." And he flung himself at me with a fierceness that would have boded ill for me had he not been circumscribed by his chains.

"Thou art mistaken," I cried. "I am thy friend."

"My friend !" he said, in a dazed sort of way, and more quietly, as if the passion in him had its ebbs and flows. "My friend ! Yea, Ian, thou wert Donald's friend in those days ; even if thou keepest me here now, far from my straths and glens, and the wife and children of my youth ; here where I hunger for the smoke of sheiling, and the whistle of plover at morn ; here where I shall stay till I die." Then he changed, as if his madness came again more fiercely, and cried, "Roderick ! Roderick, my false kinsman ! 'twas thou didst this ! 'Twas thou who desiredst my chiefship ! Give me, Ian, give me but one hour to stand before this damned Roderick, with my knife in hand, and the sea and sky before us, and I will forgive thee all."

"Thou shalt have it !" I cried. He looked at me a moment as if dazed.

"Who art thou then ? Art thou not Ian ? Thou

canst not be, after all these years, yet my poor thoughts misled me. Who art thou that weareth his looks in this place ? ”

“ I am one,” I cried, “ who like thyself hath no reason to love this place, but who hath found out the secret of this thy dread abode, and who cometh to give thee thy freedom.”

“ Freedom,” he cried. “ Taunt me not ! Freedom ! I will bless thee, bless thee. But thou dost but mock me. Ten long winters and summers, which I have marked on this wall with my chain, have I endured this place through the ice of winter and the scorch of summer, and yet have not died ! They cannot kill me. ’Tis my thought, mine hunger for revenge hath kept me alive. In all this time I have prayed and prayed that I might see mine own place and mine own loved ones once again ; and I would have given all, yea, even my pride of place, my lordship, for this one boon ; but it hath never come. Thou art but one sent to mock me ! ” And his eyes sunk listless in their sockets.

“ Nay,” I cried, “ ’tis indeed true, if thou wilt be wise and keep thy counsel.” Then I told him of my finding the secret way out, and of the wall, which being in a dark corner was not so easy to be seen. Then I told him of the small craft in the cove outside. He listened at first listlessly, then longingly ; and then, when I proceeded to speak of how he might escape, he broke down and wept, as a strong man

will who sees hope after long, long years of despair and waiting.

“I can scarce understand!” he cried. “Oh! God of heaven! my Morna and my bairns! I shall see ye after all!”

“Boy!” he cried fiercely, “let me grasp thy hand! Fear me not! ’Tis long since I have held a human hand in friend’s grasp. See, ’tis but a poor wasted talon. They have clipped the eagle’s claws.” When I gave him my hand he clung unto it. “Boy,” he said, “for I see thou art but a lad, how old art thou?” And when I told him I was scarce nineteen, he said, “And thou wilt do this? And yet thou lookest overmuch like Ian for me to trust thee! Nay, tell me true, this is not some trick, some new ill to break my pride and hope! If it were——!” he said, and he looked fiercely at me; but I stood calmly and kept his hand. “Nay,” he cried, “I see that thou art true,” then he released me.

“Eat this,” I said, giving him some of the food I had brought. “It will comfort thee, for thou must have all thy strength.”

“Yea,” he said, devouring his food like some hungry animal. “But, boy, how canst thou break these chains I wear?” Then I told him how I was friend to the armourer, and of my finding out his prison in this way.

“Yea,” he said, “the grim man who feedeth me! He is not unkind, save that he is a dull keeper to do what he is bid. But the other one! He was a devil!

Often had I ached to get these arms about him. I would have crushed him as if he were a fly, as I did the first one. That one went over-much beyond his care to torment me, but he was a fool, and I played that I was weak even beyond aid. Then he came too near, and then—ho, ho! my rage overcame me, and they found him down there a shapeless mass, and well they did, or I had been dead long ago. The second one, however, who took his place, he was even worse.”

“He is dead,” I cried, “and by my hand.”

“Then thou art in truth born to be my saviour!” he cried. “But haste thee, lad, or that blunt keeper will be coming down and will find thee.”

“Keep a good heart,” I answered. “Build up thy strength, and in a few days thou wilt be a free man!” and wringing his hand once more, I crawled through the opening, and fixing the stones roughly in their place, I went up, gained mine own side of the other wall, and arrived in my room in time to hear a loud rapping at my door.

CHAPTER XV

THE knocking at my door was imperative, and opening it I learned that the castle was in a wild stir of excitement; for the earl was taken with a woeful attack of his malady, on hearing that a party had been seen marching in our direction to lay siege to the hold. All was bustle and stir, with much running of feet and calling of orders in every direction. I went out on the battlements, and found my brother Hugh, with a sterner look on his face than was his wont, overseeing the getting of the castle into condition to meet the approaching enemy, which by their appearance were said to be under the pennons of the princely Albany. At a convenient distance from where he was employed stood the lady countess, veiled and cloaked in black, and attending her in similar weeds was the Lady Margaret Seton.

Whatever might have been my plans as to leaving the castle, they were now put quite out of my thoughts, and I went about studying how I might assist in this hour of danger, and best help in the work of defending the hold of my ancestors. Keeping at a distance, as my pride dictated, from the noble dame and her

fair ward, I approached my brother Hugh, and asked him to give me some part in the coming struggle. "For," I said, "whatever sad connection I may have with this house, and whatever shame, which I deny, may be brought upon it by my presence, I am not unmindful of the blood-kinship I bear to you, and if I cannot live here within these walls in peace and honour, I can at least die in their protection."

"Ian," he answered, "there may be those things betwixt us which should not be betwixt brothers, but there is no time now to discuss such matters. My eyes are more opened of late to things to which it were better they had not formerly been blind, and it fears me that great wrongs were done you in bringing you to this place, seeing that my lady mother hath some hate for you. I would willingly make right to you what is your due. Once this danger is past I will speak to my lady mother and see what justice can be meted out to you, in honour to my father and this house, for I fear me that my father hath not long for this life. Meanwhile there is little to do here, save to keep strict watch and ward against treachery, and with a firm blade to meet whatever foe my devilish cousin Albany may send against us."

"I am with thee to the death in this," I answered. "But hadst thou not better try and come to some terms with this same Albany?"

"'Tis strange," he answered, "but thou counsellest

as doth my lady mother. But it may not be. Mine honour and my father's honour be at stake."

"But," I said, "this is a grave matter for our house. I like not our uncle Angus, but it is in my mind that he could be of great aid to thee in patching this matter over with Albany."

"Why, 'tis he who hath counselled me to what I am doing!" he answered.

"How now! He counselled thee to dare the King's brother?" I cried. "The devil! Hugh, beware of this priest uncle of ours; he hath a hate toward thee and thy father which bodeeth ill to us all! Take not his counsel, which goeth not with wisdom; but hold this siege until thou canst make thy peace with this powerful prince, whom no man can long oppose and keep his lordship."

"Mine uncle," returned Hugh, "hateth me not worse than I him, but thou wrongest him when thou sayest he would betray this house to Albany, for he well knoweth I would hang him high from this battlement did I know such were truth. Moreover, he hath a pride of the family which keepeth him loyal. He hath talked much to me of late, and methinks he is right in his opinion that I should take my father's place and sustain the family name and honour."

"Art thou sure in all this?" I cried; for I saw the net into which he in his folly was being meshed.

"Yea, I am, Master Ian," he answered; "for know you so far hath he shown his fealty for our house,

that he hath even offered, if I defend this hold, to give himself up into Albany's power as a hostage. Could man do more ? ”

“ He hath done that ? ” I cried. “ Indeed, dost thou know—— ? ” I was going to say more, but I remembered I could not tell part of mine uncle's treachery unless I made a clean breast of the matter, and that Hugh, if indeed he believed me, in his vengeance might go so far that I dreaded to tell him, and was in truth in a narrow strait.

“ Well, sirrah,” cried Hugh, somewhat fiercely, “ speak on ! Of what dost thou accuse thine uncle ? Might he not as well accuse thee, and with better reason, that thou hast cause for infidelity ? ”

“ Oh, Hugh ! ” I cried, “ my brother, I would die for thee. Thou art grievously mistaken in all this.”

“ Wouldst thou ? ” he answered ; “ then wherefore, thou jealous biter of nails, hast thou cast eyes on one who is far above thee ? ”

“ Thou art my brother,” I cried, “ but thou wilt yet account to me for this ! ” For it went beyond me that he should speak in such manner of that which should have been beyond speech betwixt us. Yet what he said was but too true, and I saw that mine uncle Angus had been priming him on his part.

“ Then see it,” he answered. “ Be it as you like, yet it little becometh thee to cast ill words against thine uncle.” And he moved off, leaving me alone there on the wall, feeling that I had better have bitten

my tongue out, than have given but hints where I could not speak the whole truth. I now saw a new proof of the priest's cleverness and guile, in carrying his evil ends, and I perceived that it were but folly to cope with him who kept us all at odds, and yet held us each singly in his power.

Still I was not one to be foiled, for I was desperate, and I saw that he had some new deep scheme on hand to carry out what I knew to be his secret aim ; and I made up my mind that I would rather die than that he should gain his point ; so I determined to stay here, do my duty amid all this web of injustice, and if possible save these proud, unloving folk in the face of their own folly. My brother's doubt of my truth to him but determined me to be truer to him than ever. " Biter of nails, am I ? " I said to myself. " Thou wilt yet be thankful to that same biter of nails, my proud kinsman." This was but a boy's folly in me, but there was a sweet pride, even in my dark condition, which prompted me to give back good for ill in this matter. I was not unmindful also that I might be of aid to another, who, far as she was from me in position, was not beyond my help. I thus consoled my ruffled spirits, but Fate was not done with me even yet. There was worse to come. As I stood there, who should touch me on the shoulder but mine uncle Angus. I was in no mood for his consolation, so I shook him off with an ill grace ; but he felt he had me in his coils and gave me no favour in his words.

“Come, mine ill-mannerly Church cub,” he cried, “put on thy best face, thy lady would fain speak with thee !”

“I am no Church cub,” I cried ; then remembering what folly it was to quarrel with him, I remained silent and followed to where my lady stood. I now fully realised that his object was to humiliate me beyond all forgetfulness, in mine own eyes, before these people ; and especially her whom I thought most of, and thus cut me off from all human relations for his own purpose, and the more devilish was his plot that he knew that I was aware of it all. All this only the more maddened me against the man, especially seeing that I could have no redress. I now saw that mine only true revenge was in foiling these same schemes of his, but to do this I had to keep mine own counsel. So I remained silent when he said as we went, “So thy proud brother hath been showing thee thy place, my brave swordsman !” I answered naught, and by a hard effort kept my temper, though I could have smote him in the face where he walked, had I dared. When we approached the countess the slight figure beside her was for withdrawing, but the countess said, “Thou needst not go, my lady, ’tis but this young man with whom I would have a few words, then will we go to my lord, who needeth us.” So the slight veiled figure stayed, though she spake not to me one word, nor seemed to notice me more than if I were a common armsman come to receive orders, and I knew it was the intention of the lady

countess, who probably also had word of my folly toward her ward, to further lower me in her eyes.

"Hark you, sirrah," she said to me as I came up, and she looked in her dark robe like some proud queen, "know you that this time of danger be no time for skulkers and brawlers in this castle, where even our meanest vassals have laid their hand to some work."

As she spake I could feel the fierceness of her hate and high scorn burn my soul like a blast of a hot desert wind, and I saw that the slight figure near trembled for an instant 'neath the veil, but I suppressed my woe, and determined to meet the countess as proudly as she met me.

"Lady," I cried, "I am no skulker or brawler, as thou well knowest, and if I am in shelter of these walls at this present time, I am here against mine own will, and at thy express commands, as thou well knowest," and I said this somewhat fiercely, for her contempt and unjust words cut me to the heart, and I could not but justify me in the presence of her whose opinion I valued more than all else in the wide world.

"Sirrah, dost thou dare?" she answered, "dost thou dare beard me here, thou ingrate? Thou shalt be punished. Ho there!" she cried, turning to a man, "call up the armourer. I will chain this youth to this wall or a lower one."

"Chain me, hang me, madam, do thy worst, I care not, further thou mayest not go," I answered. But here the priest, seeing perchance that my humiliation

had gone far enough for his purposes, put his voice in and said, "For shame, lady, thou wilt not do this at this perilous time?" She turned on him fiercely.

"Thou!" she cried, "thou, sir priest, darest thou meddle with me?"

"Madam," he answered, "he belongeth unto Holy Church, forget not that."

"And what of that, sir priest?" she asked.

"'Tis an ill time," he answered. "Thy credit that way is much overdrawn now, as thou knowest;" and I saw that he had influenced her, but it angered me to be under his protection, so I interrupted fiercely—

"I am no Churchman, I am mine own man, as thou well knowest."

"Then if thou art, thou must e'en hang alone!" he answered, with his ill smile. "But, my lady, were it not better to put this same forward youth to some hard practical labour, where we may profit by his presence, and rob him of much of this arrogance that turneth his head." And turning to me, he said—

"Thou most boastful youth, in all that pertaineth to arms and practical matters, what canst thou do?" His sudden question puzzled me for a moment, for beyond my book-lore I was as bare of accomplishments as a youth could well be, and I stood in a quandary thinking how I should answer, when my eye caught the figure of my friend the smith and armourer, just come up at the lady countess's order to be my executioner. An idea struck me, and I answered, looking at my

lady, "I know one trade indifferent well, I can do smith's work, as yon armourer can testify doth he love me."

"Yea, my lady," said the armourer, "I am much in need of aid, now that every blade and heft of the castle seemeth on my hands, and the lad hath a right strong and deft hand and arm for a Church clerk."

"Yea," said her ladyship, "he shall be thine apprentice, see that he shirketh not at his toil ;" and with a scornful side-look at me, she turned and went down.

This sudden come-down of all my fortunes, though part of mine own making to get rid of mine uncle and his schemes, yet jarred sadly on my pride, so that I could scarce move, and ere I could think I was alone in the now coming dusk of the northern night. I looked about me, and over the turrets and bastions on one side loomed the billows of the wild ocean, angered by the late autumn season, and on the other side the wild fastness of heather-clad hills and distant mountains of the south and west. "'Tis a fit setting to my life," I cried, and I turned me sadly and started to go down, for I felt that toil were better than thoughts such as mine, when suddenly I felt someone pluck at my coat, and I turned me about, and there in the dusk stood the Lady Margaret.

"Keep up thy courage !" she whispered, "remember if all else fails thou hast one friend." I could stand it no longer. My passion overmastered me at her kind words and sight of her sweet face, I was on my

knees to her, and pressed my lips to her hand. Then she seemed to remember the difference betwixt us, for she drew back with hauteur and said sadly—

“Sir, you must not!”

“Madam,” I cried, “I thank you for your kind words and condescension toward one like me.”

“Keep thy heart and be worthy of thyself,” she answered, and ere I could collect myself she was gone. Then, with a heart beating with many mingled emotions, and wild thoughts which I dare not look into too closely, I hurried down to the armourer’s cell, and was soon merrily beating in unison with my worthy friend and master at the ringing blades of steel.

CHAPTER XVI

MY toil with my friend and master the armourer was not so arduous that it kept me from knowing a little of what was going on in the castle ; and it was advantageous to me in that it gave me somewhat to do, and little time to worry over mine own position and the dangers and plots that surrounded us all. Now, that wise man my master, who was a right good servant to my lord, commended me highly on my choice betwixt his and a churchly calling.

“ For what hath a youth like thee do to with masses ? ” he said, as he swelled his bellows, which were made of several good deer-hides, and blew the fire fiercer in his forge, where the ruddy blades rustled and gleamed while he tucked them comfortably in with coals.

“ Thou wert not made for a saviour of souls but a maker of blades and spear-heads, and then thou canst ride to battle in thy lord’s train, and e’en test thine own workmanship on his foes, as a good man and worthy smith should.”

But my mind was too full of thoughts of mine own to pay much heed to the worthy smith’s maxims ; for I had secret plans for ridding him of his prisoner

below, and had he known what was really in my mind, as I stood there beating the hot iron and making the sparks fly on his anvil, he would have been more like than blessing me to have treated me as Saint Swithin did that great enemy of mankind, when the latter, on some similar treachery bent, had entered the precincts of his charmed forge.

However, I had no time to consider mine unfairness to the honest smith, for I had much to do and much to consider. The troops sent by Albany had dwindled down into a few men-at-arms and a squire commanded by one knight, who duly appeared before the castle, and, demanding admittance in the King's name, had formally delivered a message commanding the lord earl, for his great crimes, especially that of foully murdering the lord bishop, to appear in person, under the direct penalties of life and property, at the royal Court at Stirling, one month from thence, to answer for his ill to the great Prince Albany. This the lord earl had, in opposition to his countess's will, but secretly instigated, I believe, by the false priest, risen in person to answer in a defiant manner; the political result of which was to bring sure ruin on his house, but the physical effect was the shortening of his life.

As I was not present at this scene, the interview with the ambassador, and only had it from the words of others, I cannot give it in detail here, though it had a dread effect of a most tragic nature on me and others,

and brought about all those ill ends that the scheming priest had so much at heart to accomplish. It seemed, in short, that the news of the knight's approach and demand were carried at once by mine uncle to the earl in his sick chamber, and where, in the detail, he, for his own purposes, repeated in full all of the arrogant demand, omitting none of its most insulting threats and denunciations. So that the earl, being incensed even beyond his natural passion and bound of control, had had himself borne into his great hall by his retainers, and there, rising from his sick couch, overborne by rage and pride at the nature of the message sent him, with swollen veins and blazing eyes sent back the royal mandate of the puissant Albany in such strong and defiant terms, and couched in such treasonable and bitter language, as in which only some heathen Emperor might return to an overbearing Pope his mandate of submission. When he had finished he raised himself up, and with clenched fists went off into one of his ill-fits, where he lay as if dead, and was so borne back to his chamber. It was said that the knight, a sinister looking man, a Sir Something-or-other, at first stood there smiling an ill smile at his page, as if wondering at the earl's foolhardy audacity; but that as he went on the sly smile changed to a look of covert fear, and even terror; and when dismissed he was in much haste to leave the castle. I also heard that mine uncle Angus, who stood near in grim silence during the whole scene, did much afterward to explain,

or pretend to explain, away the words of his brother, and apologise for what he called the earl's state of madness ; but that on the other hand Hugh treated the knight with but short words and stern manner, and made no single attempt to palliate his father's message to the princely Albany ; the result being that, while the knight went away with some sort of sympathy for the polite priest, he carried back but a poor account of the surly son of so headstrong and renegade a father. There is no doubt that this was the direct cause of the siege that was brought against us afterwards, and fastened upon Hugh the hate and vengeance of our cousin Albany. Such during the following days was the condition of matters in the castle of my fathers, where I was now installed as armourer's apprentice, and where in that capacity I was already meditating the breaking of the chains of its most important prisoner. Twice since I had discovered him had I found time to pay him a visit, during which I had been preparing him for that liberty he had despaired of so long, and which he even now still doubted as finally to be accomplished, so accustomed does the mind become to the base conditions of an habitual hopelessness. It was on the even after the departure of the envoy, and the hurry and bustle of the castle for what was expected in the way of siege gave me leisure and chance to set my prisoner at liberty. I had tried the small vessel on the water, but was too unaccustomed to such a craft, or to any, for that matter, to venture in it ; but the

prisoner, who claimed to have been used to such crafts on his native lochs and streams, hailed it with delight as a safe mode of deliverance.

“My son,” he said, when after some labour I had relieved him of his chains and clothed him with garments which I had procured, “I can never bless thee enough !”

“Stay not for blessing,” I cried, “or thou wilt curse us both do they find us here. Follow me, and fear not !”

But so long had he been in a crouched position that he had in somewhat lost the firm use of his limbs, so that all he could do was to crawl and stagger along ; but I knew, and he knew, that all that he wanted was the fresh air and the exercise of his outdoor life to bring him back to his former strength. “Once I am in the open,” he said, “I will be mine own self again ;” and with a swift persistence he followed me out and down to the water’s edge, where, without my assistance, to my surprise he launched the boat and grasped the paddle, as he called it, with a celerity and ease that made me marvel.

“My son and brother,” he cried, “this is no moment to tarry for words. Thou hast done that for me I can never forget, but from what thou hast let fall in thy conversation it hath come to me that there is that betwixt us which thou little knowest of, and which added to this humane act of thine doth make us one for ever ! As I have told thee,” he continued, “I am of an old and kingly line. My people were princes

in the West when these present monarchs were not known, and I hold it no honour that the father of my father's father did marry on this so-called royal line. But this is to little account, save that I have some small power with this man they call Albany, who hath honour to be of common blood with my family. I can speak no more; but take this," and he gave into my hand a curious small stone, graven with some strange marks on one side. "If thou ever wantest mine aid," he said, "go up the strath beyond the castle till thou seest a large bare hill which standeth by itself, and on it, in a hollow, a large square stone. Leave this there on that stone, and come back in one day and a night and thou shalt hear word of me. Now fare thee well!" And ere I could answer he dipped his paddle in the water and was gone. I stood for a few moments lost in amazement, now that he had vanished, at what I had done, and though I would have done it again had it been in my power, yet now that it was over I could not help feeling as if I had, in a manner, been lacking in faith to mine house, for so strong are the ties of blood that we are not thought to have any feelings, even those of pity or mercy, which are at variance with the feud duties to the house of our lord.

Having tried to give my weakness somewhat of an honourable appearance, without much success, I retraced my steps, and as I went up the stairway, there in the passage I met mine uncle Angus face to face. We stood there for some short space, each of us taken

sudden and ill at ease, but he was the first to find his speech and self-confidence.

“Well, sirrah,” he said fiercely, “so thou hast been spying on my room.” Then, as if remembering himself, he added, “Thou hast but little to gain here, ’tis but the private place where a poor priest who loveth the sea and his own thoughts may come and muse.”

But I was bound to show him that I knew the full depths of his treachery, so I answered with a meaning look, “The better that thou mayest muse in safety by the sea’s edge, I have rid thee of that craft in which thou wert wont to go abroad on its bosom.”

“How knowest thou? What craft?” he demanded, as if in anger. Then he said, “’Tis not worth while to waste words with such as thee when graver matters are at stake. Oh, thou fool,” he continued, “thou hast made a bad mess of things with thy meddling. But what carest thou that a great house like this is on the brink of ruin?”

“’Tis little thou carest!” I cried, as I followed him up a similar stair to that of mine, which opened into a trap in the floor of his chamber.

“Hearken, thou marplot,” he cried as we ascended, “here is ill news for one who careth! The earl, thy father, be dying; thy brother Hugh by his obstinate pride be as good as dead” (rather by thy treacherous counsel, thought I in my heart); “but,” he continued, “this fair lady, who, like another Helen, fires this little Troy, is soon to be taken back to Court, where thy fool eyes will

never see her more ; and what will be left to thee but to beat apprenticeship to yon brute armourer, who hammereth his iron beneath ? ”

“ Better that,” I answered, “ with a good conscience than the power of a tyrant or plotter,” and I turned to follow him up, when I suddenly remembered that I had left the door of my room barred on the inside. There was now but one thing for me to do, and that was to go back and leave him to suspect what he liked of me in the matter ; and I was so sick of the man that I cared little, and I had had enough of his presence. But he said, “ Wait, Master Ian, I would speak further with thee.”

“ Well, make short thy counsel,” I cried, “ for it hath done me little save ill so far.”

“ Say rather thy refusal to abide by it,” he answered ; then this strange uncle of mine made his last effort to get round me by a power of his glamour. “ Ian,” he cried, placing his hand on my shoulder, “ dost thou not see that ’neath his rough exterior, and, perchance, ill speech, thine uncle Angus hath thy good at heart ? ” And he spake so much in his old complacent manner, and he wore such a fine assumption of kindly, almost affectionate, rebuke, and appeal in voice and manner, that had I not known his wiles, and judged him rather by his cold furtive eye, I would have believed him to be that kind, misunderstood, fatherly priest that he would have himself appear. But I shook him off. “ Nay ! mine uncle,” I answered, “ thou and I are not to walk

together in this business, for I would have thee understand that thy ways are not mine, nor mine thine. Thy love for me, which thou dost protest so strongly, is but that of the toper for the wine cask when the wine is in," and I made as to go.

"Stay," he commanded, "one word more, thou perverse fool. I would have made thee great, I would have given thee thine own; but thou hast scorned me, and all for the false fancy of sickly bastard honour and a pink-and-white slip of a girl. Now dread my vengeance! Dost thou know this headstrong earl is ended, thy brother but a boy without wit or guile, that even now the troops of Albany come this way to take the mad earl? Then what will be thy part? Hast thou no part to play? Or wilt thou, who claimest all this possession and power, sink them to the toil of an armourer's apprentice, and will he who hath aspired to the love of the King's ward content him to stay below in safety, and beat steel for braver folk to defend her."

"I care not for thy taunts!" I cried. "I will carry me as circumstance and my natural valour direct me in this castle, where I am of little account. Let the danger come which thou so well lovest to prophesy, and I will know how to meet it as becometh my manhood!" And with that I turned on my heel and went down again, while he stood staring in some astonishment.

CHAPTER XVII

THAT day I absented myself from my accustomed place at the forge in the armourer's cell ; and the next day, on descending to my work, fearing to meet the smith's discovery of the escape of his prisoner, I was surprised to find the fire out, and, instead of hammering away at the bright steel, my friend and master in great confusion of countenance, bestirring himself as if making ready for a long journey.

“What meaneth this ?” I cried, for I saw that he was hoping to have avoided me, and to have got away ere mine entrance. But he eluded my question, and kept hard at work on his preparations with an averted face, as though he feared I would read his secret with mine eyes. “Look here, master smith,” I cried, assuming a tone unmeet for my position as his assistant, but quite in keeping with mine own station as one interested in the welfare of the castle on the eve of an expected siege. “What meaneth this ? I come to aid thee in thy work and I see thy fire is out, thy anvil silent, and thy hammer laid aside,” and I caught him by the shoulder. Then his manner changed, and dropping the bundle he was making of some special tools

valuable to his trade, he confronted me with a sullen and dogged manner.

“It meaneth but one thing to me, my bold master,” he replied. “My prisoner is flown or vanished; as his keeper I am answerable for him with my life, and as I cannot produce his body to show that he be dead, ’tis best for me, knowing the fierce earl and the people of this hold, to be gone myself, ere I be pinned with arrows to the beam in the castle wall, or be made to dance on naught in an hempen collar.”

“But is it likely,” I questioned, “that any but thou will discover for some time the disappearance of this man?” For I could find nothing else to say, nor could I at the moment simulate surprise at the man’s disappearance; and I continued, “The earl is dying, so they say, and the rest of the folk who know have much to think of beside this matter.”

“Be that as it may,” he answered, “it is true all the same that I should be going, ere the earl thinks to make inquiries.”

“How now, my master!” I said, “is it honest for thee to leave this place at this time, when so much dependeth on thee, when it is like that a long siege, the gravest perchance known in its history, is about to beset its walls, and thy knowledge and skill will be needed every hour? Is it right and faithful for thee to forsake it in such an hour?”

“As for that,” he answered, with some impudence, “I am but a poor smith, versed only in metals and their

temper, leaving such things as faith and honour to clerks and others such as thou art. 'Tis but for me to know that when the edge is worn the blade is useless, that when the blade is snapped the hilt is but fit to cast away ; and this teacheth me to know that, aside from my fear of punishment for loss of this prisoner, 'tis time for wise folk to leave this castle. This earl, as thou sayest, will soon be gone. His son is but a hot-headed lad, who hath his father's madness, without his gravity of experience ; and this dread priest, thine uncle, is like to turn this hold into a monkery ; so that where be my trade to find a use ? Then, if the Lord Albany taketh this place he may hang me ere he findeth out mine ability. So it is imperative that I find a new master ere I lose this one, and as matters stand it behoves me to make mine exit. Therefore, stand aside, master," he continued ; " or better, for I have a liking for thee, lad, come thou with me, for it seems to me that thy place in this hold be but a poor and unhappy one."

Now I could not but admit to myself that there was much truth and sense in this selfish reasoning of the master armourer, and I could not but be struck by his kindly offer to make me of his company, and added to this I had a liking for the man and should feel his absence sorely. But at the same time I judged that he lacked that higher moral sense of his duty and of care for the safety of the castle, and I made up my mind to detain him if possible. So I said, " But, sirrah, thy will may be as thou sayest, and thy

reasons for leaving be strong, but how mayest thou get thyself out of this hold without thy flight being discovered ? ”

“ As for that,” he answered, “ I am a privileged man, being master armourer here these many years, so that I have liberty to come and go from this place into the country on certain duties pertaining to my craft and other matters ; so that none will suspect till I am well out of their reach and am safe in the Lord Albany’s protection.” To this I had no answer, for I saw that he had cleverly foreseen all, as he had said, and that his past liberty and faithfulness would now enable him to escape without suspicion. But I had one argument left to confront him with, and had kept it until the last, as I had not the courage to use it at first.

“ This may be all very well, my good smith,” I said, “ but thou hast not counted on my knowledge of this matter. Thou well sayest I am not happy in this castle, but for all that, being kin to the lord thereof, and knowing the value of thy trade to its safety at this time, I tell thee that if thou dost not put yon bundle aside, and get thee to work, I will go at once to the Lord Hugh and inform him of the whole matter.” To my astonishment and chagrin he turned on me and laughed in my face. “ Nay but thou wilt not,” he said, “ my bold sir, for then it might be asked how did my prisoner escape, and I might remember that thou wert privy to knowledge of his place of confinement, and alone

had access to this room wherein is the opening to his cell. Were I to tell how thou didst express strong sympathy with his condition, it might go harder with thee than with myself."

At this I stood as if confounded, not without some anger, for I saw that he had a good inkling of the truth, or at least enough of it to close my mouth and cast the blame of his going on my shoulders. He also gave me a feeling that I had been guilty of putting him in danger as a consequence of mine act. Seeing my confusion, he continued, "It were better for thee as well as myself that I were gone. Then all the blame would fall on me, whereas if I stayed, thou, being my assistant, mightst fall under the same accusation."

At this subtle reasoning, for all my worry and confusion, I could not help but smile. "Master smith," I said, "thou hast a fine array of words for a man of metal, and some fine sense of reason for all thy dulness. It may be true, all that thou hast said, and to which I have no answer; but I cannot but feel that it is an ill time for so good a craftsman as thou art to go over to the enemy, knowing, as thou dost, all the weak places and secret defences of this hold. But as thou art resolved on this, and as I may not hinder thee, I would have thee promise not to say whence thou comest, and that thou shalt not give thy skill in building engines or driving bolts against these walls. Dost thou but promise this, and I will wish thee God-speed."

"Well hast thou considered and spoken, my good

master," he answered, "and it only grieves me that I cannot have thy company on the road, and the pleasure of making a good armourer out of thee in the place where I shall go, for it is mine aim to go straight to the Court, where my skill will have better chance of being proven than it getteth in this dull place. And," he continued, "I am not leaving this hold without a smith, for do I not leave thee, who hath already much skill for the coarser making and the mending thereof." Even in this time his pride in his skill could not but give him this patronage of my lesser experience.

"My good armourer," I answered, "it is my determination to hold thy place here till a better doth come; and in mine humble way try to make good thine absence." With that he shook my hand, we wished each other God-speed, and I parted from him, the one soul with whom I had aught in common, in but sad condition of heart. Neither of us knew of the tragic circumstances under which we should next meet; but I realised with some heaviness of spirit and qualms of conscience that in letting loose the prisoner I had caused his guard to disappear also.

CHAPTER XVIII

IT was not for many hours after his departure that the armourer was missed, and not until some time had passed was he suspected of desertion. Then, though a party was sent out in search, it was too late, and no trace of him could be found.

Meanwhile I had striven to the best of my ability to take his place, and I soon found that, though by no means a skilful metallurger, yet I was somewhat more than an indifferent welder of handles and temperer of blades ; and I found a resource against my loneliness and sad thoughts in this occupation, which, while it built me up into a more sturdy frame of body, gave me also a more healthful trend of spirit.

When it became a common knowledge that I was the master armourer of the castle, my advice was called into requisition as to the repairing and putting in order of the great cross-bolts which were on the battlements—those engines of war by which we send great stones among the enemy, and which are therefore of much value in the defence of a fortress such as Girnigoe.

Now here my knowledge did not go so far, save to

strengthen beams, by adding to or replacing iron clamps and bolts with which they were held together. But for the placing of the engines at the proper angles, and the testing of their carrying power, and the directing of their volleys, I was a poor representative of the departed master armourer. Luckily, however, one of the elder men-at-arms had some little skill and much pride in these matters; and as I paid close attention to what he required to be done, we, between us, managed, so far as in our power lay, to get the castle into a fair condition for the expected siege.

Meanwhile my brother was occupied in seeing that stores of provisions and herds of cattle were brought into the hold, or close under protection of its walls. These provisions were gained by making levies on those of our vassals who were obliged by their feudal duties to supply such when called upon by their lord earl. For several days these preparations went on, while in the meantime a greater addition was made to the number of our followers, the earl's vassals for the most part, save some who were angered at his impositions upon them, being willing to follow their lord and to defend his rights and power, even against so powerful a prince as the great Albany.

During this time, which lengthened into weeks, I had become changed by my hard labour of arms and hands from a puerile stripling into a morose but active young man. In this mood I determined to make my place mine own in the castle, living, if possible,

save when at toil, neither with the great folk nor with the retainers. For this purpose I pled the value of my time as a reason for having my meals sent to the smithy, where I spent many of mine hours when not on the battlements with the captain of armsmen directing the practice with the great cross-bolts. Here sometimes my brother Hugh would come and watch our work, or perchance ask a question, or give an opinion ; but as ever since that night when we had ill-words I had never addressed him, save to answer his questions, we had in truth no commerce of thought save as any armourer and his lord might have. As for the lady countess and the Lady Margaret, I saw them not. They were ever absent when I was on the wall, the countess being, I understood, in close attendance on the lord earl or at prayers in the chapel. There I seldom or rarely went, fearing to meet either of them or mine uncle Angus ; for in my new vocation I wanted naught save to forget mine ill, and gradually to carve out a new mode of life. But it was not altogether possible to shut out the old life and the old thoughts ; though I would in my poor pride try and persuade myself that I was dead to all in the past, I found, even at my toil, or on my couch at night, that the rude armourer would think upon a fair face and a sweet voice, and yearn for that love and human friendship which a sad fate had denied. And at times, when in stern and cold converse on mechanical matters with my lordly brother, who ever maintained toward me, as

toward the others, a high tone of command, would my heart leap out of the bounds of injured pride, and yearn toward him with a feeling of brotherly love. Now matters went on in this way for some weeks, when somewhat happened which threw the castle into terrible sorrow and gloom. It was no less than the death of the great earl himself, which happened in a mournful and tragic manner.

For some days it had been understood that he was sinking ; but shut off, as I was, an alien in the place, I could know but little of the events which went on beyond the duties with which I was engrossed. If at times it came to me with force that he was my father, and that the fact that he was dying should be of matter to me, I put it aside as not to be considered, seeing that I was never thought of in that relation by him or by others ; and it was no fault of mine if I were prevented from performing those sacred duties of a child towards his own parent.

One eventide, however, when I was putting some finishing touches on a blade which I had intended for mine own use, and as I beat at the bright metal, making it ring on the iron, and thinking over my sad thoughts, a page came running into my cell, and prayed me, " For Our Lady's sake," to make quick haste and come at once, " for," he said, " the lord earl is passing, and he calleth thee : and, master smith," he continued, " all night long he did naught but call on a woman's name which none of us have ever heard before ; and

my lady countess she does naught but weep and pray ; and now he calleth for thee, and thou must haste quick, for he be in the throe ! ”

Without staying to remove mine apron of tanned deerskin, or to lay down my blade, I followed the page, who without pause to take breath retraced his steps whence he had come. Soon we came to the great dining-hall, where the proud Earl of the Cattynes, feeling his last hour draw nigh, had ordered himself to be borne, to die in his state and pride, as his princely fathers had done before him.

There I went in, I, the rude armourer, my hands and face smeared with the smoke and rust of the forge, my rude apron upon me, with that blade in mine hands, and stood before them all, where they gathered about him as he lay there, partly propped up in his chair of state, dying. On one side stood the lady countess, her face marked by tears, holding his hand, and near her the Lady Margaret ; on the other, my brother Hugh, with a sad and stern look on his face. Near him also stood the priest, watchful and calm, but with that same ill smile which he ever wore in good or ill, in time of gladness or of sorrow. They all looked up as I entered, and the lady countess started forward.

“ He shall not come here ! ” she cried. “ My son Hugh, send him away ! He hath no right here ! ” But my brother spake not nor stirred, only glared on me with a stern, dark look, and then looked on the Lady Margaret, and then at the pavement. But I heeded not him

nor her, but walked up to where the earl lay gasping, as one who hath hard struggle to get his breath, and who fain would be away. As I went forward the priest stepped in front of me.

“Back!” he cried in stern tones. “Thou must not disturb him.”

“But I was sent for,” I cried, “and he is my father, he would speak with me,” and I cried this like one in anguish who demands his rights.

“Thou hast no right here!” cried the priest; “’twas but in madness he cried, and ’twas but his own name he spake.”

“Then tell me,” I said in fierce tones, “whose was the name on his lips all last night?” Whereat they all started, and the lady countess cried, “Begone, thou insulter! Wilt thou intrude thyself upon a dying man?”

“Nay, but I will stay!” I cried in agony. “He is my father, I have seen but little of him in life that I should be driven from him in his last hour!” And I kept my place.

“This is hideous,” said the lady countess. “My son Hugh, wilt thou see this?” Then she turned and cried, “Ho there! send men and hale this person forth!”

“Ian,” cried mine uncle, “thou canst do little good and much harm here. Thou hadst better go.”

“Thou liest!” I cried sternly. “I am wanted.” Whereat my brother Hugh turned and spake.

“Yea,” he cried, “thou false priest, he is wanted ! Let him stay ! ”

“Then I warn thee of the consequence,” said the wily priest, turning to Hugh ; “ ’tis thine own fault doth he stay ! ”

“Hugh, my son,” cried the countess, “why wilt thou do this ? ”

“By Heaven, he is his son ! ” cried Hugh ; “my father called for him, as we all heard, and he shall speak with him if I lose my earldom for it ! ”

“I thank thee for this, Hugh ! ” cried I.

“Nay ! ’tis but justice I would do thee,” he answered fiercely, and I saw that I stood alone.

Just then the earl seemed to revive, and turned his eyes in a vacant manner and called a woman’s name. It was that of my mother. The lady countess started back in pride and anger.

“He raveth ; he is mad ! ” she cried aloud. But I knew better. I saw that his latest hours were his best ones, and that if he had any good thoughts, they were of my mother, as a man ever turns to the loved of his youth. Then he spake, “Thou false priest, come hither ! Speak ! Tell me where is my son Ian ? She said I had a son—a son Ian ! ” Then he raised his voice as he said, “Curse thee, thou false priest ! What wrong didst thou to me and to her ? ” Then his mind seemed to wander, and he cried, “Ian, Ian, where art thou, my son ? ” I could stand it no longer ; but I knelt down at his side, and cried, “My father,

oh, my father! I am Ian, thy son!" Whereat the lady countess cried, "This must not be! Hugh, my son, wilt thou stand idly by and see thy mother dishonoured?"

Then something happened which silenced us all. For there is somewhat awful, as of another world, in the words of the dying, when they stand, as it were, betwixt this and the next. The earl opened his eyes, and looking at me said, as if just come out of a sleep, "Who art thou?" And I answered, "I am thy son Ian!"

"My son Ian!" he cried. "Then I have wronged thee," he said. "Haste, haste, sir priest, get thee parchment to take my words," and he tried to sit up. But the priest was too clever; he answered sternly—

"Think thou rather of thy soul, my lord earl; for thou standest but on the brink."

"False priest," cried the earl, raising himself up, "wilt thou not do my will?"

"Nay, but I would exorcise thee!" answered the priest.

"But 'tis a wrong, a great wrong!" cried the earl. "Ian, my son——" then he paused as if unable to speak, and with a great cry, as of one in mortal agony, fell forward and was dead.

Thus died my father, Ian, the thirtieth earl of his line, a fierce man and a bold; ever more ready to meet his enemy than to elude him; who, for his many sins, may Heaven assoil him, was of good intention, even

toward me whom he had woefully wronged, and whom he would have righted at the last did not death and mine ill uncle prevent him.

He sleeps in the chapel, in the tombs with his fathers, the great earls who went before him ; his name and arms on the stone above him.

Seeing that he was dead, and that all was over, and that I was not wanted there, I hastened out, leaving those others who claimed more right than I to bewail him, and make for him fit funeral, as was the custom of the house. But late that even, when they had laid him in princely state before the altar of the chapel, with sombre trappings and dim tapers about his bier, I stole in alone and knelt down at his side, and gazed on the face, so still in death, and let loose my woe ; for great earl and proud man though he was in life, in death he was but mine own father.

CHAPTER XIX

TWO days later the earl was buried with great pomp in the chapel vault, amid much appearance of woe and the grief of his proud countess. Hugh, who was now earl, therefore seemed for some fatal reason to have assumed, with his new greatness, much of his father's fierceness and harshness of temper, and those who had known the young heir as an open, frank, but imperious youth, now saw in the new earl a moody, dark, and singularly morose man. There is no doubt that my father's action at the last had somewhat to do with this change in his character, for he must have seen that there was somewhat due to me as his father's son, and at times his conscience must have smote him. Whatever his thoughts, I saw that he avoided me, and this among other things made me resolve that as soon as possible I would put my old determination into action, and leave the place for ever. Now that the funeral was over, I was back at my forge, trying to lose myself anew in my work; but the words which the earl spoke and those which he had tried to speak bothered me much, and made my position difficult. I also now felt that the lady

countess knew, or suspected, all, and that the priest was fully aware of my true rights in the case ; but I also knew what price I would have to pay for his aid, and was determined, no matter what happened, to avoid him and all his plans. I could not help but pity my brother that I should stand betwixt him and all this power, which he had been reared to believe his of right ; I felt that if anyone could bear the loss it was myself, who had ever been used to shame and ill-usage, while for him it was a different matter. With all his coldness toward me, I could have gone off and left him in full possession of what I knew to be mine own. I knew that he intended to act fairly by me, but that my father's action at the last had convinced him that all was not sure as to his own place, and that his honour was at variance with his pride in regard to the heirship of his earldom and all which it meant to him. I fancy that he and his lady mother must have had some strong and stormy scenes concerning this matter ; but this was all put out of mind by the arrival of Albany's army, which, with pennons flying and great engines of war, laid bitter siege to Castle Girnigoe.

All was now once more bustle and excitement, and it must be said for my brother that his only weakness was his headstrong nature, and that the fierce answer he gave to the call for surrender was worthy of the best bravery and noble bearing of his martial ancestors. So it was not long before there were arrows flying and bolts hurtling to and from the castle and the large and

well-caparisoned army of besiegers. For one long week the siege lasted, and then it became plain to the leader of the royal army, a hot old noble named Graham, that the only chance to subdue Girnigoe would be by a slow and tedious process of starving us out, unless by some act of treachery the castle might be given into his hands.

We inside were also soon aware of this our great strength, and it made our people the more valiant and insolent in their bearing; and while there was careful watch on the walls by day, there was more feasting and carousing by night than became a castle in such a state of siege. I alone was anxious and doubtful, for I knew that our food could not last for ever; and, moreover, I was dubious as to what part mine uncle Angus would play in the matter. That he would not scruple to give the castle up I did not doubt, the only thought in his mind being the terms which he might make for himself.

Toward the end of the week, after a more than ordinarily vigorous assault, in which the enemy lost many men, and in which I, who had now become a skilful engineer of the great wooden cross-bolts, had aided in doing much destruction, a white pennon of truce was seen approaching the castle from the direction of the enemy's camp. Now, having given the matter much thought, I knew, from what I had heard of affairs, that we could not carry the siege for ever, and that only the very cold weather, which is severe in our northern

country, would drive the enemy away ; and that long before this our garrison would be in a state of starvation. For, since the enemy had come, they had scoured the country and exhausted all the supplies, whereas we, shut in as we were, had no opportunities of adding to our stores. Therefore it seemed to me that this was my brother's only and last chance to make his peace with Albany on terms at all fitting with his pride. Therefore, when I saw the herald approach for this purpose, I put my pride in my doublet, as it were, and accosted my brother where he stood, silent and thoughtful, on the wall.

“ Well, sir smith,” he cried haughtily, “ what wouldst thou have ? ”

At this my pride nigh overcame me, but controlling myself I said, “ My brother, let all else be forgot betwixt us save that I am thy faithful armourer, and would serve thee to the best of my ability with my life.”

“ Well,” he said shortly, “ what is it thou wouldst say ? ” Then, in as short space as I could put it, I laid before him our condition, and our ill prospects, and the likelihood of this being his last chance of capitulation with honour. At first he was inclined to flare up, but as I went on he heard me with some thoughtfulness.

“ There is much truth in thine argument, master smith,” he answered, “ and will be taken into my good consideration ; saving always mine honour and the good name of mine house, which ”—and as he said this he could not but speak fiercely—“ hath always

bred men noble in mind, and holding before all else their personal honour, never to surrender to any foe so long as life doth last. But," he continued, "what counsel wouldst thou give if the enemy doth not see fit to meet our terms?"

"Then I have but one word," I answered proudly, "and it is to hold Girnigoe till the last man dies."

"Spoken like a man," he answered, with more than his ordinary warmth. Then, as if remembering himself, he added, "But I have those to think of who are dearer to me than life, and who are ill-fitted to the long rigour of a close siege;" and I knew whom he meant, so I said naught. Then he said, with some hauteur, "It is not for me to hold counsel with thee, but mine uncle hath another plan which is more to my liking."

"And what may that be?" I asked fiercely, for I dreaded that his counsel was toward our ruin.

"'Tis not for me to say," he answered coldly; "thou art presuming on thy place. 'Tis enough! I will consult my lady mother and mine uncle Angus on thy plan," and with that he turned and left me.

I saw it all clearly now, and, even though he had hurt me keenly by his cold treatment, I could not but pity him as one dropping into the net mine uncle was setting for him. I could have cried out to him for his own sake and for all our sakes to take my counsel and beware the priest, but I knew it were no use. Soon after he went down, and I knew it was to the great

hall or to mine uncle's room to consult on this important matter. I was at my wits' end to know what to do, so I made a resolve to make one more effort to save him from himself and his tempter, even if I had to lay my pride in the dust and plead for my plan with the lady countess. So I hastened down to intercept her before she could go into the great hall. I knew where I would meet her in the courtyard coming from the chapel, where she spent most of her time now, seeing that she had so much to plead for with Heaven for both the dead and the living. Strange to say that she, since his death, had made quite a saint of the lord earl, and had an especial shrine reared near his tomb, and there spending the greater part of her days, so inconsistent is the nature of humanity. Going down, I met her, as I expected, coming from the chapel, her rosary in hand, closely attended by the Lady Margaret and her women. I went to her straight, and said—

“My lady, could I have a word with you?” When she saw who it was, her religious mood seemed to vanish, and she said with some pride and bitterness of voice, “What wouldst with me, master smith?”

“Lady,” I cried, “this be no time for strife or hard words——” I would have gone on, but she would not let me.

“Strife?” she said, in her scornful way—“what have I to do or strive with such as thee?”

“Madam,” I answered, “I care not how you look

on me, but for your own sake and that of your son you must hear me ! ”

“ How now ! ” she cried ; “ dost thou threaten ? ”

“ Nay, lady,” I answered, “ ’tis not I who threaten, but Fate, dost thou not deal fairly with the coming ambassador. For the sake of him whom thou dost love, take my words to heart, and make peace with this man, this Albany, ere it be too late.”

She heard me through, I thought, with much scorn on her face, but some consideration. Then she spake : “ And thou wouldst be my lord chamberlain in such high matters ? ’Tis but little good advice that thou couldst give my son. And thou, sirrah, wouldst advise the surrender of this castle to the Lord Albany ? ”

“ I would, my lady,” I cried, “ could it be done with honour, for thy son’s sake, seeing that it will have to go in the end.”

“ Yea, my bold traitor,” she answered, “ ’tis easy for thee to make surrender of what is not thine own.”

Then the Lady Margaret, who stood near, said earnestly, “ Oh ! my lady, do thou as he suggesteth. I feel that he hath wisdom in this matter. ’Tis for the best. Do it, I pray, ere it be too late.”

At this the countess started as if stung. “ Thou also, girl ! ” she cried. “ Thou also against my Hugh, thy betrothed ! Art thou mad ? Seest thou not that this fellow counselleth for his own interest and against my son’s ? Father Angus hath the right plan, and the honourable one. We hold this castle,

and we will give this same Albany a surprise he little suspects, ere many days." Then she turned to me and said, with much fierceness, "And as for thee, get thee back to thy forge, thou master hammerer; and leave such high matters to thy betters."

"Then, lady," I could not forbear to say, "you doom yourself by your own folly." And I turned and left them, and, as she had ordered, went back to my hammering.

The council of war was held, and, as I suspected, was more to the liking of two such haughty spirits as the countess and Earl Hugh, than was mine. It was carried out, and in the end proved, as I had foreseen, to be the ruin of us all.

The immediate result of this council was that the bearer of the treaty was received in great state in the large dining-hall, where my brother Hugh, with his mother on one hand and the priest on the other, stood at the head of the hall, surrounded by armsmen and retainers in armour. Through a passage up the middle, betwixt long deep rows of armsmen, amongst whom I stood in my place as a humble retainer, the envoy was escorted to deliver his message and to receive his answer. He came in proud and brave, a fine-looking young squire who was ambitious to win his spurs, and he looked every inch a man to win them and to keep them. He faced my proud brother, who stood equally manful, with his fine earl's belt and armour, looking more like a prince than like an ordinary noble—fair in the face, and

omitted not a word of the dread message he brought, though he knew that the haughty earl could have caused him to be struck down where he stood.

“ Well, sir squire,” said my brother, sitting him down in his chair of state, “ what is thy word with us, and why is it that yon host of men hath this week back laid bitter siege against me and mine, in this mine ancestral castle, and against me and my vassals in this mine earldom of the Cattynes ? Answer as your life shall stand on it.”

“ My lord earl,” cried the squire, “ I am sent here as standing for and speaking for the most noble my Lord Graham of Esk, baron of that ilk, in his name, who commandeth the army of his Most High Majesty, Robert the Second, King of Scotland, as ordered through the most noble Prince Robert, Duke of Albany ; the same Lord Graham of Esk being sent here to greet thy late father Ian of the Cattynes and Orcades, and to make him answer for his many crimes, special being the most heinous murder of his Grace the Bishop of the Cattynes, for which crime your lord father being summoned of his liege Majesty to appear at Stirling, and the which he not having obeyed, this same Lord Graham hath been sent to take this his castle by storm in the King’s name.”

“ Which thou hast not done ! ” cried the young earl in defiant tone.

“ Nay, hear me, my lord earl,” cried the squire. “ My mission to this castle of Girnigoe is not on these matters, but is from my leader the most noble Graham, who saith thus to thee : that hearing that thy late father the earl,

who committed these crimes, be dead and past that punishment meted out by earthly princes ; and hearing he was afflicted by some madness afore his death, which might palliate somewhat those same crimes, and, further, having no quarrel with thee, but much sympathy with a young lord of a great house such as thou art, he hath taken it upon him to ask thee to treat with him in all honour, and that, certain compensation being made to Holy Church for the death of the late bishop, he pledgeth his honour that thou wilt be fairly dealt with and thy peace be made with his liege Majesty for the deeds committed against Church and State in this thine earldom."

"Sir squire," cried the Earl Hugh, in defiant tones, "thy message meaneth that my wily cousin Albany, seeing he cannot smoke out his victim, would coax him into his hands."

"You wrong my message and the sender thereof, my lord earl," cried the squire with some spirit.

"Nay," cried Hugh, "but I cast thy pretended mercy back into thy teeth, thou false messenger ; and tell my cousin Albany that he may have me at his feet, doth he come and catch me."

"Nay then, my lord earl," cried the outraged squire, "I have but this to say : thou hast lost thine earldom and thy life by thine own folly. My message to thee now is that thine earldom is confiscated, and the penalty death. Such is the fiat of thy liege lord and majesty the King." So saying, he made a low obeisance to the lady countess and passed out. And I knew that,

whatever scheme my brother had as he stood there in all his splendour and pride, he had lost his last chance of keeping his power and allegiance to the crown of Scotland.

He waited until the squire had gone out, then he said, "We will send him another answer he little suspects ere many hours are over."

CHAPTER XX

MY uncle's plan to surprise the besiegers soon became known throughout the castle, when it was announced that a sudden sortie was to be made that night on the camp of the other army, who, not suspecting so much temerity on the part of the besieged, would be taken completely by surprise.

This plan met with much approval, as the heavy loss on the part of the besiegers and the little damage done to the castle had made our people over-confident and rash in their seeming safety. Also the earl's defiant answer to the squire, and his proud treatment of him, had raised the spirits of all his retainers.

But down in my heart I feared treachery on the part of my wily uncle ; I had suspicions that he had some secret communication with the enemy, and it only needed a traitor to give them warning of our coming to turn this reprisal of ours into a signal defeat. That such was going to happen I was more than sure, else why had mine priestly uncle given such advice as he had done ? I determined to watch him ; but this was a difficult matter, considering that I was supposed to be deeply engaged in my vocation as castle smith, which

gave me all I could do to fulfil the demands upon my skill. That he had any communication with the enemy by way of sea I could not believe, as I had removed his only mode of access from that direction ; but it was hard to say whether he had not some means yet unknown to me for secret treachery, so deep were his resources, as the event proved.

Beyond this there was naught I could do, for I had exceeded my sense of pride already in making appeals, only to meet rebuff and insult. So incensed was I at times, that had it not been for a feeling of honour I would have been half inclined to take mine accusers at their word, and try to make secret terms for my rights out of this dismal ruin which was to ensue. But such feelings were only passing, and I can say sincerely that my uppermost desire during all that time was to save my foolish brother from his own rash self, and from his devilish uncle, who was determined to bring about his destruction.

Toward the fall of night a council of war was held by the earl, to which a few of the principal armsmen, the priest, and the lady countess were called, and I was surprised by also receiving a command to be present. Remembering the late contemptuous refusal to consider my advice, I could not but view with suspicion this new turn of affairs. What followed proved my surmisals to be correct. All were in good heart as to the favourable results, and even mine uncle was in high spirits for one usually so taciturn, but this on his part was likely

to be a blind to deceive others as to his real objects and desires.

The principal discussion turned on the question of who should lead the sortie. The countess was anxious that Hugh should remain in the castle, and that the warder or castle chamberlain should have the honour of leading the attack. I was at first surprised to notice that the priest stood with her in this matter, not so ardently as she argued it, but sufficiently to show that it was agreeable with his counsels. I soon saw, however, that the priest did this on purpose, knowing my brother so well as to be sure that he would sooner lose his earldom than forego leading his followers in person on such an adventure, and, furthermore, that any kind of opposition would only determine him the more strongly to have his way.

“Well, go if thou wilt,” cried the priest, “but it had pleased me better that thou shouldst have stayed, and let a less worthy person lead this attack—even thine own uncle, had he but power and vocation to handle a sword in so masterful a way as doth our brave master armourer yonder;” and he looked at me with a grim smile.

“How now!” cried Hugh, “and thou wouldst snatch from me this honour? Nay, if any gain glory by this, ’tis I, and to me shall fall the danger, though I fear none.” Then the countess spoke, in some tone of anxiety—

“Sir priest,” she said, “tell me truly, hast thou any

misgiving for my lord's safety doth he fare on this expedition ? ”

“ Madam,” returned the wily priest, “ we are all in the hand of Heaven, yet for my part I cannot but admire my brave nephew for his martial courage and manly decision.” And I saw as he spoke that he cleverly managed to keep himself a loophole out of which to escape, no matter what the end might be. Then I spake up.

“ My lord earl,” I cried, “ if thou art to lead us in person, let me be at thy side to defend thee.”

“ Nay,” cried the countess, “ it shall not be ! ” Then my brother turned to me and said sneeringly—

“ Master armourer, we have commanded thee to this conference not for any value of thy advice that thou wouldst give us, but because we have determined upon a special duty for thee to perform. We are not lacking in remembrance of our last sortie from this castle, and of the valued part thou didst play therein. But thou art a not indifferent defender of fair damsels, if no fighter ; therefore,” he continued, “ it is our will that you stay here with a few choice men to guard these walls while we go forth to battle.”

Now it doubly angered me that I should be insulted and left out in this way from the real danger, if there were to be any, and that my brother should see fit to hold in contempt mine attitude during the last fight at the bishop's castle. In it all I could see plainly the work of mine uncle, and I felt it bitterly that my brother in

his sneers at my lack of desire to fight had impugned my manhood.

However, it was not my part to demur, but rather to do that which had been allotted to me, so I gave a reluctant acceptance to this, in a sense, galling office. But I found out that there was much more behind this mine appointment as guardian of the castle, and which discovered to me a blacker deviltry in mine evil uncle's schemes than I had yet deemed possible. But of this I will speak in its place.

It was deepest night, at that hour when camps of war, being in safety and in no expectation of an enemy, are wont to lay down in security, not sleeping on their arms, to confident repose, when our midnight attack sallied forth from the walls of Castle Girnigoe. As it was my place to marshal them out and see the gates well closed and drawbridge lifted behind them, I had good chance to watch their departure. They were a bolder, better caparisoned, and more determinedly silent troop than that which had issued forth on the last occasion under the old earl. And they had reason to be, for they were not now going to surprise a church garrison, asleep in its own self-confidence, but a well-appointed and moderately watchful army. It is true that that army was supposed to be unsuspecting of their coming, and, as they had learned by spies sent out, to be quite off their guard, and liable to be easily surrounded and annihilated, yet even in this case they were likely to meet with a stern and bitter resistance

from men well trained and experienced in the arts of war.

Therefore, as they issued forth with but little doubt of their success, and a feeling of honour in going to the attack, I must own that it gave me a galling sense of the position I occupied, as of one only fit to guard closed gates, while those considered my betters went forth to open attack. But I had even more to endure. As the horsemen and men-at-arms filed out, grim and silent in their war accoutrements, my brother Hugh rode out into the courtyard, with plumed helmet and belted sword; and I doubt if I ever saw him look so proud and soldierly as he did at that time, when he seemed to feel his position as the keeper of his great house and the leader of a brave following of valiant men. Just then he stayed his steed opposite to where I stood, and from the chapel where she had been praying came forth the countess, followed by the Lady Margaret.

“My son, oh! my son!” she cried, “if thou shouldst fall?”

“Fear not for me, mother,” he answered in his proud way. “Rather pray thee for our enemies that their humiliation be not too great, for they have need of pity this coming night.” And he leaned over in a stately manner and kissed her upturned face.

“And thou, my lady,” cried he in sad tones to the Lady Margaret, “wilt thou not also come and give me God-speed?”

At this she started back as if doubtful with herself,

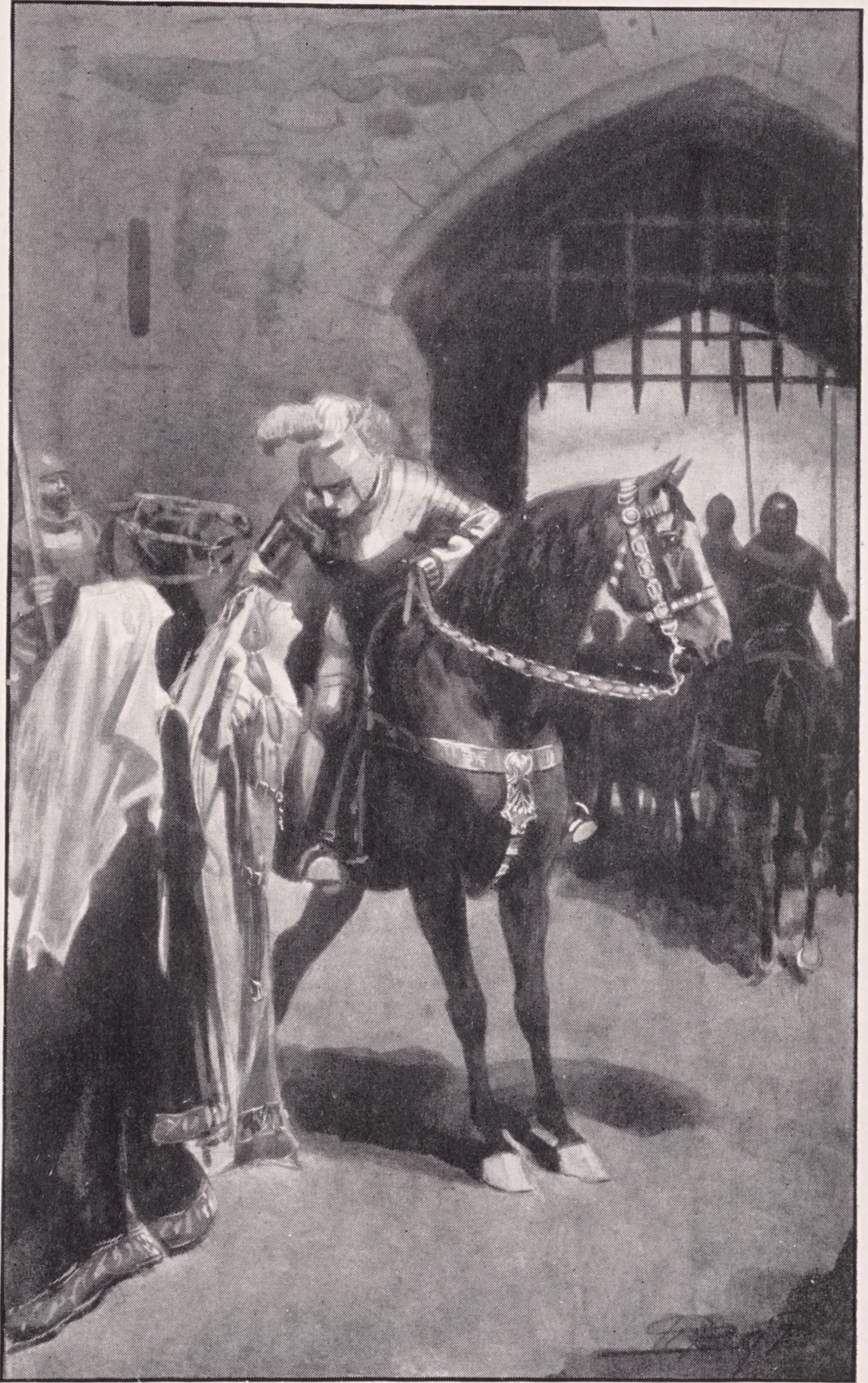
which the more surprised me ; then she went forward, and parting her closed veil, showing her sweet face pale and subdued in the moonlight, so that my heart seemed to stop in its beating at sight of it, held it up to receive his parting salutation. It was all over in a moment, but my hand, which clenched the hilt of my sword, gripped it so strongly that the blood came out from my fingers' ends. Then he straightened up, and speaking to me, said—

“ Master warder, for this night I leave thee in charge of these ladies and this castle. See that thy charge is well rendered as thou valuest thy life,” and his voice rang out harshly and sternly on the night.

“ My lord earl,” I cried, “ such as I am care little for their lives ; but I have one thing left me, and that is mine honour. I promise thee that if my charge is not kept in truth as thou requirest, I will render that life up in their defence or quickly forfeit it at your disposal.”

“ See that you keep it,” he cried. “ Raise the gate,” he commanded to the keeper, and as the gate went up he rode out, and I never saw him again until we had bitter reason to rue that mad night and its ill consequences. After him rode his squires and chosen men. Then the gate went down, the bridge up, and I was for the first time master of Girnigoe.

But if I had been one disposed to be proud of this mine equivocal position, which I was not, for I was too full of a sense of coming ill to think of aught else save my bare duty as seneschal, I was soon to be reminded that



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if Girnigoe had lost its master it still had a mistress, and one who in the most cruel and tyrannical manner made herself felt.

“Master armourer,” she said, coming forward, “we are but ill provided with a garrison. Thou knowest my son had no thought of our danger in this kindly protection of high bastions and stout walls, or he had left us better captained and more sturdily followed,” and she looked scornfully at myself and the few men-at-arms who stood about me. “But,” she continued, “we must e’en make the best of what we have. Now tell me straight, sirrah, hast thou a knowledge of thy duty ? ”

Now I liked not this manner of her scorning my wardership, so I answered her sternly, “Lady, thou must know, or if thou dost not thou shouldst know, that this position of mine is none of mine own seeking. It grieves me most ill that I am not out among those who have perchance gone to graver dangers than they think of ; but such as it is, I with my poor experience will do my best to keep these walls, though my mind misgives me that we even here are in greater danger than thou or other thinkest.”

“Danger ! ” she answered. “What mean you ? Speak, sirrah ! ”

“I may not speak, madam,” I answered, “nor could I tell thee from whence it may reach us ; but something teacheth me that we are in much jeopardy all the same.”

“A mere coward’s fancy,” she answered, with some

scorn. "A pretty warder, thou, to be left to such a charge."

"Nay, madam," I answered, "but as brave as you like. Yet with your leave I will go my rounds and see that all is in safety ;" and so saying I left her.

Having examined all the weak parts of our defences, and having placed sentinels where we could soonest be apprised of the approach of danger, I placed myself on an eminence where I could best view the coming attack which our troops were about to make on the enemy's camp. I did this, and I watched the more eagerly, for I was full confident that we in our turn were to have a surprise, and that my poor brother in his pride and folly had gone out into the meshes of a net which had been laid for him. If I had had no other reason for believing this, I had read it all as clearly as I ever read page of book in the sinister smile on the priest's face as he last gazed on my brother, ere we closed on him the gates a short time since. Now my mind was in a dread quandary, for sure as I was of the coming evil, the most horrible part of it all was that I had no suspicions from which quarter it might first strike us ; but I resolved to wait and watch the event and abide the issue, which I knew could not be long in coming.

When our sortie had disappeared from out of our walls into the night, they were lost to us in the dark as completely as if the wolfish night had opened its voracious jaws and swallowed them up horse and foot. It had been my brother's aim to steal around on to the

other side of the enemy's camp, and so surprise and surround them, making the attack complete on all sides.

It seemed fully the space of an hour, as we count, after the gates had closed on our outgoing force, when there rose on the night air a loud challenging and confusing shout; and soon was heard the trample of horse, the clang of arms, the cries of the wounded, and the shout of battle, as the clash of the onset met in the distant gloom; and it was not long before those of us in the castle, who understood such matters, were aware that there was no common battle raging in our vicinity. How it was going and which side held the advantage we could not see, but the most valiant and hopeful of us could not but know that it was otherwise than the result of a perfect surprise.

"'Tis a strange matter," said an old armsman to me as we stood together. "These men fight not as one sudden and rude awakened. Methinks it smelleth of treachery."

"'Tis our duty to do our lord's will here, master armsman," I said, "and not think us on other matters." But this idea that we had been trapped now spread throughout the castle, and the countess in much trepidation came up to where I was on the outer wall.

"What meaneth this?" she cried to the priest, who had followed her up.

"It meaneth, madam," he answered, "that thy son hath his work cut out for him, but that he doeth it

bravely." Yet I could not but see by the lantern's light that there was a strange expectant air about him, as though he looked for somewhat more which was about to happen. I stood there trying to discover in my mind where or what would be the next manner of attack, when all of a sudden I cried to myself that I were a stupid fool, and, as my lady had said, utterly unfit to guard such a place ; for it came over me all of a rush, with a great beating of my heart, that in my worry and trouble I had, for the time being, forgotten all about the passage underneath that led up from the sea.

To think now was to act, so fearing I was too late, I called to me a sturdy armsman, and, taking him aside, said to him, "Mowat, go you down into that passage leading to my room and that of the Wizard Tower, and stand you guard with your blade ; and the first man that you see approach that way, kill him. Then bring me word." He at first stared at me, as though he thought I were mad. Then he said, "Thou art master warder here and I must obey. But were it not better that I stay here, or help those who guard the gate, than go where thou sendest me, which seemeth but a fool's errand ?" Now this was a long speech for such a man, and an impudent one, and, as I knew, came partly from the common contempt of my position, and also from the man's sense of the ridiculousness of my order. But I had no time to parley with such a man. Our danger was too imminent.

“Go !” I cried, “or I will cleave thee where thou standest !” And my argument was the best I could have used, for he went without hesitation, as my look frightened him and brought to his mind the manner in which I had finished his fellow-armsman. Mine only fear now was that my suspicion of this danger had come too late, and I would liked to have gone down in person and examined my room and that of the priest, but I dared not leave the walls where my duty kept me, unless I was sure that there lay great peril below. But the trouble came even sooner than I expected. I had barely turned from giving this order, which I had done aside, so that mine uncle might not suspect, when we heard a great thundering as of horses’ feet, and a voice came from below demanding entrance at the castle gates.

“In whose name,” I cried, “dost thou demand entrance here ?”

“In the name of the King, the Duke of Albany, and the Lord of Esk,” came the answer. “And dost thou not open up we will batter our way in.”

“No one entereth here this night save in the name of the Earl of the Cattynes,” I said.

“Then have at you,” and a shower of arrows fell about us, one wounding an armsman, who stood near me, in the arm.

“Get the great bolt trained on them,” I cried. And we strove to point it in their direction, but they had come too near, and it was impossible to aim it so low,

covered as they were by the angle of the castle wall. So all we could do was to keep out of reach of their arrows and defy them, while the fight in the distance continued as fiercely as ever.

Things now looked very doubtful to me, though to those about me we seemed in a fairly safe position were only the earl and his party back safe under cover, but to my mind matters never looked worse. The countess stood with her face white in the dim light, and close beside her the Lady Margaret holding the former's hand in her own, as if commiserating with her in her fear and grief, and my heart could not help but hold a deep sorrow for them, who were thus suffering so because of the young earl out there in the grim night, where he had gone perchance to his death. I had stood thus watching them and hearkening to the still fiercely contested, distant battle, and keeping an eye on the hostile party who still hovered under the outside wall near the gates, as though expecting some mode of entrance, when on a sudden there came a great yell from the centre of the castle, and ere it had died out, the man Mowat came staggering up the stairs with a white face and a wounded arm, crying, "Master, we be lost! We be lost! Men be coming up at us out of the sea!" The countess let a cry of horror, and the Lady Margaret went pale and clung to the parapet. But I turned and cried to the priest, "Thou devil, art thou a man, guard these on thy life!" and calling to me six of my men with swords to follow me, seized me a lantern, and hastening down

into the castle, made for the corridor leading to the tower. I lost no time, hoping that I might be able to close the priest's trap or mine own. But I was too late, for just as I opened the door a man stepped out, and I saw in the light of the lantern we carried that the room was full of armed men, with more coming up. I had but a moment to decide ; but for once I did the right thing. Knocking the man down, I slammed the door to, and ran back to where my men were who had followed me.

"Here, my brave fellows," I cried, "if ever you fought for the lord of Girnigoe, now is your time ! Stand with me here, and as this passage is narrow, we may chance be able to keep it till our lord arrives, or, if not, until we are dead men." But I saw by their faces that the men were confused and startled, as though they had among themselves been contending on some dread matter. "Be these men ?" asked one of them ; "be they mortal, master ? We be not afeard to fight men, but to contend with wild wizard-folk, or seamen, it seemeth not canny."

"Fools !" I cried, "do ye not see that there hath been treachery, and that these are the Lord Graham's men brought round by sea, and let in by some secret passage ? Fight if ever you fought, and the first who wavers will die by mine own hand !" I said this in an agony of desperation, for I saw the whole cruelty of the damned priest's trap now, or thought I did, for there was worse to come of it for me, as I shall show.

We had not long to wait, each of us huddled there with blade in hand, and face drawn and expectant, in the gloom of that lonely passage, when we heard them approaching ; for this was the only way by which they could get up into the castle, and to do so they would first have to cut us down.

As they came near in the dark, holding their lanterns, with their swords drawn, their leader, who was the same young squire who had brought the message that day, stopped and cried to us to give up the passage and surrender on our lives, promising that we would be protected, and this, he said, in the name of the King, Albany, and the Lord Esk.

“ And what if we will not ? ” I cried, facing them as they crowded before me.

“ Why, then,” he answered, “ we must cut thee down ; but ye are fools, seeing ye are so few and we so many.”

“ Many or few,” I cried, “ in the name of the Earl of the Cattynes, if a man pass here he shall die ! ” At that he made a pass at me with his sword, but I struck it from his hand with my great blade, and the rest who followed at his back covered him as he fell. I knew not much more for some time, save that I swung my blade and that those who got past me were met by my good fellows behind. There was much cursing and hammering of blades, and many on both sides went down. But this could not go on for ever. Of a sudden my foot slipped in a pool of blood, where a poor fellow lay dying ; and ere I recovered I received a stroke on

mine arm, and was down, and the fight was over in a moment.

“Harm him not!” cried the young squire, who had recovered himself from his late mishap; “but secure him and bring him up. He is a fool, but a brave one.” Then will or nil I had to follow where they went on.

“Stay, sir squire!” I cried. “There are ladies up there.”

“They shall be treated with all courtesy,” he answered. “But are there others?”

“Nay,” I cried, “we are the garrison.” And he looked at me and smiled with a grim humour, as with but a sullen look I followed him up.

CHAPTER XXI

WHEN I arrived at the great hall where they took me, we found that the lady countess had made her stand there, as was the custom of the earls to receive strangers on all occasions of state. There we found her, fierce and proud, standing beside the chair of state. At one side of her was the Lady Margaret and the countess's women, who shrank as if in terror of what might yet come, for on the occasion of the sacking of castles all sorts of horrors have happened. But the lady countess stood as firmly and proudly as if, instead of awaiting her enemies, she was to receive some guest. Her terrible anxiety for her son, which I knew well was filling her breast with anguish, was hidden as if under a presence of marble, and for all her cruelty to me, and her proud scorn, I could not but admire this carriage of hers that surpassed the courage of most men in that her most terrible hour. Even the young squire who preceded me was daunted by her appearance, as, more like an avenging demon or an angry queen, than a lone woman trapped in her own hall, she demanded fiercely—

“Who are ye who dare thus intrude on the sanctity of Castle Girnigoe?”

“Madam,” said the young squire, when he had somewhat remembered his duty and the strength of his position, which her undaunted presence had caused him for the moment to forget, “we are here in the name of the King, the great Albany, and the Lord of Esk, to receive the body of the Earl of the Cattynes, dead or alive, and take him to Stirling, there to await the King’s pleasure.”

“Thou shalt not!” she cried. “Rather,” she continued majestically, “wilt thou rue it well that thou hast, by whatever treachery, entered here; for when my son the earl returns, which he will shortly, he will hang thee to the castle wall for thus insulting my person and this castle by thy presence.” As she continued speaking the soldiers of Albany crowded into the hall, showing in such large and formidable numbers that I wondered at her audacity of speech, which, for all its folly, I could not but admire. My mind was now dwelling upon one matter, and that was how to warn the earl ere he returned, were he not already captured; and even though my arm was sore, and I was weak from loss of blood, I tried in the stir of the moment to leave the hall unnoticed, but the young squire, who perceived me, said sternly—

“Move you not, sirrah!” Then, turning to the countess, he spake—

“Madam, I respect thy rank and sex, but thy threats are useless. See these men who are in possession of this castle. We have all its gates in our hands, and

thy son, the earl, is even now on his way in quick retreat hither."

"Dread Heaven!" she cried. "My son! my son!"

"Thou seest that resistance is useless, madam," continued the squire. "He also will soon be our prisoner; but I have orders to say that none in this castle will be molested. Our strict commands are for the earl alone."

"Let me go to him! Let me pass!" she cried in a moment of agony.

"Nay, madam," said the squire, with much respect, but firmness, "I must detain you." Then he cried to his officers, "See that none leave the hall."

Then it was wonderful to see her recover her cold pride, as though ashamed of her momentary emotion. "Let Heaven's will be done," she said, "for I defy the King, as my son will do when he doth come." Not a word more did she say, except in a fine scorn.

"A nice trap in which to catch an earl, my brave squire. Did you but meet him in the open, it were otherwise this would end." Then she sat down and moved not, but seemed like some cold lady of marble, as we all stood in that great hall awaiting the return of the Master of Girnigoe. And a grim welcome it was for my brave, generous brother, and as cruel a trap as ever sprung on a bold and unsuspecting man.

I could not help moving up to where mine uncle stood, looking on as careless as if but an indifferent spectator of a scene in which he had no interest.

“Well, thou villain!” I sneered at him in his ear, “thou hast worked thy will at last.” But he never stirred as much as a finger or eyelash. Then he looked me over with a sort of fine contempt.

“Oho!” he cried, as if knowing me for the first time, “’tis the brave master armourer and faithful warder.”

“Thou fiendish plotter,” I answered, “canst thou work ill so light against thine own and wear such mirth? Beware, or I will tell my tale of what I know!” I cried.

“Not as regards thyself, my fellow-plotter,” he answered.

“Thy fellow-plotter? What mean you?” I said, for his words hit me like a slap in the face.

“Art thou so deep, and yet not know that I can see through all thy protestations?” he answered.

“Oh, thou prince of mummers, hath I not wit to see that under all thy pretence thou wert with me all the time.”

“Thou darest accuse me of that?” I answered.

“By Heaven, mine uncle, this is too much that thou shouldst belie me in such a matter! I will make this matter open. I will spoil thy game now, even though I be hanged for it.” And I stepped forward to speak, when he pulled me back.

“Fool!” he whispered, “thou goest to thine own destruction. Who would believe you ’twixt us? Harken to me; thou knewest of yon place below as well as I. Who was it but thee who stole the boat?”

Thou it was who didst aid the prisoner to escape." Here I started at his words.

"Ha! Thou understandest," he went on. "Then which of us dost thou think would be suspected of this treachery didst thou speak out? I am an old retainer of this family, devoted to the Church, retired from the world and its ambitions, treated in this castle with all honour and confidence. Now how is it with thee? Thou art an outcast, a rival brother of the earl, receiving but contempt and ill words from all here; and a rival not only to thy brother in his earldom, but also," he hissed, "in his love."

At this I started from him as though he were a snake that had stung me. "Thou art no man, but a fiend, an incarnate fiend!" I cried. But he only laughed. "Now, my brave accuser, stand an thou darest!" he challenged. "Tell thy brave tale, and I will tell mine!"

Bad as I thought matters to be, this was worse than I could ever have imagined. "Thou devil," I answered, "thou hast the best of me, as thou ever hast had, and of all in this house; but remember, I will get the better of thee yet." But he only laughed once more in my face; so I left him, and moved back to my former place. For I could not stand in his sight and not desire to kill him—an awful feeling when he was of mine own kin and blood; but something now took place which made me forget even this ill man and his desperate schemes, which was the coming home of my brother.

It seemed, as we learned afterward, that he found so soon as he opened the attack that he had been trapped and cheated. Though the enemy pretended to be at rest, they were close at watch for attack at all points ; and were even aware of the earl's proposed point of assault ; so that in the end, instead of his having them at disadvantage, they held him at bay by reason of the surprise he had got in place of the surprise he had hoped to give them. But he was valiant, this brother of mine, and not easily daunted, and his courage fired his followers, who did not allow their disappointment to affect their boldness, though they knew, now their eyes were opened, that they fought in desperate case. They had thus contended valiantly for some time, when, discovering that their enemy was stronger in numbers and better placed, even my brother, whose reckless courage would have braved everything, began to see that they had gained naught by this sortie, and that it were best to retreat gradually and not hurriedly ; but as men who, having come out to hit hard, were minded to go back tardily, and give blow for blow as they went. But they soon found that this was no easy task, for their very scheme of attacking the enemy from the other side, away from the castle, now placed the foe betwixt them and their sole place of refuge. Some leaders on seeing this would have despaired. But this only made the earl more reckless, and he decided to make an effort to cut his way through, instead of waiting to get around. The wary Graham, however, who preferred to take him alive,

and who knew he had him at all sides, let him force his way, natheless, so that in time he got clear with some of his followers, and found himself alone in the dark at the front of his own castle gates. Here, seeing no light, but finding the drawbridge as had been arranged by the foe, a cooler and more crafty man would have smelled treachery ; but not so the young earl. Bidding his few men follow, he crossed the bridge, where, finding the courtyard also deserted and dark, he hailed the garrison. Getting no answer, even he felt that it were somewhat ominous ; but dismounting and leaving his horse in care of his squire, he went, sword in hand, and came in and up into the castle, until he stood at the door of the great dining-hall, and so met his fate.

When he looked in at us all, and saw the castle, the hold of his fathers, in the possession of his armed foes, and his proud lady mother standing there so white and desolate, for a moment his heart sank within him. He started and his face went ashen. But it was only for a moment. He was a St. Clair of the Isles, of a brave race, who never flinched at pain or death, and met even disgrace and all but dishonour with a proud face. So he stood for a second as it were, taking it all in, and then walked up proudly and calmly along the armed lines of his grim, silent enemies and his prisoned retainers ; and coming to where his mother sat, knelt at her feet and took her hand.

“Mother,” he said, “oh, my lady mother ! Could I have but spared thee this !” And when I saw him do

this so nobly and calmly, as if he were entering a peaceful state drawing-room, I forgot all he had done of ill to me, and I loved him and was proud of him as my brother and as a man.

Then he rose from his knees, and turned to my uncle, all of his father's look at this most dread moment flaming in his face as he said—

“ Mine eyes are opened, my damned uncle. I owe all of this to thee ! ” and with his iron glove struck him hard in the face. It was the one wrong, unknightly deed he did ; but I could not blame him, knowing as he knew, and as I had always known, the villainy that the other had worked against our house. But mine uncle did not speak or stir, only there came over his face a more sinister smile, if that could be possible, than I had ever seen it wear, and as he regarded his nephew I knew that naught but my brother's death would now appease him. The lady countess alone started and cried, “ Hugh, my son ! What hast thou done ? ”

“ Ask him ! ” cried my brother, “ and let him tell thee what he hath done ! ” Then he turned to the young squire, who had stood silent all this while, and handing him his sword, said—

“ Sir squire, you are mine enforced guest. I bid thee good e'en, and place myself in thy hands. I pray but one thing of you, if a fallen man can ask aught, the safety and care of my lady mother here, and this lady, who was to have been my bride,” and he bowed to her with lordly look.

“My lord earl,” answered the squire, who, like all of us, was struck by the earl’s quiet and fine manner of taking his capture, and pitied him in his heart, “there will naught be done to thy lady mother, nor to this lady, nor to this castle, my commission being to secure your person alone. And it grieves me to tell you that you must come with me to the Lord Graham of Esk, to be his prisoner to the King at Stirling.”

“Nay, sir!” cried the countess, in great agony; “then he is doomed! They will slay him! Oh, my son, my son! why didst thou leave the castle?” Then for the first time in my knowledge of her did this strong woman seem to totter and fall; but the earl caught her in his arms, and the Lady Margaret wiped her lips, and she, after a space, came to. Then staggering to her feet, she cried, “My son! O God! my son! Where is my son?” But during her swoon he had kissed her for the last time and was gone.

Next day at sunrise the army left the castle, and with it the young earl went a prisoner. Ere he left the gates I tried to get speech with him, for my heart was full, and I desired that he should be at one with me ere he departed; for my mind was sore with a dread thought that he would never come back alive. I knew that, added to the many wrongs and ills that the cruel Albany had against him, the blow on the priest’s face was the seal of his death sentence. I came up beside his horse, whereon he sat pale and silent, betwixt two armsmen

who rode on either side ; and I said, with some sort of agony in my voice—

“ Hugh, my brother, have ye no farewell for thy brother Ian ? ” But he looked full ahead, as though he saw me not, and I then knew that he deemed me a party to the priest’s treachery ; for now, when too late, he saw I had wrongs against him, and judged me by those wrongs. “ Hugh,” I cried again, “ doubt me not ; my heart is woe for thee ! ” Then he turned and looked at me, and there was a great scorn in his eyes as he said—

“ Words are little use in my case ; ’tis deeds that speak ! ”

“ Hugh,” I answered in my agony, “ my brother, believe me true ! I have ever been leal to thee through it all.”

“ Then show it to them,” he cried. “ For me it is too late ; show it to them, be true to her, and to her.” Then he rode out proud and brave, as though he rode to some hunting or a field of victory rather than to his death. But his words smote me hard, for I knew that he meant by “ her ” and “ her ” his lady mother and that other one, so dear to us both ; and his “ her ” and “ her ” sounded in my heart many a day after.

CHAPTER XXII

THAT was but a sad and woeful time for those of us left in Castle Girnigoe, which followed on the departure of the Earl Hugh to meet his death. There were but few of us left in the castle, as the most of the retainers were either dispersed to their homes or had gone themselves out of timidity, not caring to be found too close to a house trembling on the verge to a fall. Not that they were not true to their lord's family, for they would, as they had shown before, have shed their blood and have given of their substance so long as the earl was in need of their aid. But so soon as the case had gone out of their hands, as it were, they thought it the more prudent to await the issue of the doom that threatened Girnigoe as simple vassals rather than as armed retainers of a ruined house. As there was no immediate danger from any quarter, my duty as warder, which office still remained with me by virtue of the earl's last words, and because none other cared to usurp my place, was on the whole but a slight one. My duties were to see that the gate was closed and the drawbridge up each night and morn; and also to see that all was lawful and quiet about the

place, all of which took but little of my time. For this reason I had much leisure to study the conditions of our ruined fortunes. By the few retainers left little was said in my presence, but what little I heard gave me less hope for the future of my house. That the earl would be executed, and the earldom, with its feoffs and holds, would be handed over to some other lord, perchance he of Esk, was a commonly accepted belief throughout the castle. Now, apart from my sorrow and fear for Hugh, this apparent ruin and confiscation of the earldom was but ill news to me, who knew, as I did, that I was without doubt the rightful owner as eldest son and heir of my father ; and that as the crimes committed, for which punishment was enforced, were none of mine, it would be, therefore, both a great wrong and an illegal matter on the part of the King, or others, to sequester titles and estates from their proper possessor and inheritor without just cause. This I came to know afterward. But even the slightest knowledge I had, or suspected at the time, availed me not, as I could not, had I proved my title, which I was unable to do, have had the heart to oust my brother. I was also aware that he would rather die as he was, Earl of the Cattynes, than accept his life at the expense of such degradation. This, then, was my position and state of affairs at this time.

The lady countess I had not seen since the night of the earl's departure, and did not meet her for some time after. She had kept to her rooms at first in

great grief and illness of body, bewailing her son as dead and her house as ended. Here she stayed, attended by the Lady Margaret, for she would see no one else ; nor could she at first be prevailed upon to go even to the chapel, declaring that Heaven in its vengeance had doomed her house, and that the curse was so great as to make it useless to pray any more. After a time she gradually became more calm, and recovered some of her old pride and temper. Knowing this, and feeling a sense of insecurity in my temporary position as ruler of the castle, I tried to get a message to her, but I was told that at mere mention of my name she went into a violent rage, cursing me and laying on my head most of the tribulation of her house.

“What right hath such as he to be here,” she cried, “when my son—my son—is departed hence ? Chamberlain ! I will have none of him ! Better have a spit dog fill the place than such as he ! ”

So she received my message, and I had to go on and hold my patience until she should see fit either to endure my guardianship or cut me off. Meanwhile, I tried to get matters into some sort of shape for the coming bitter season, which is a trying one in our northern country of bleak mountains and wild, maddening sea. Much provision and fuel had to be collected to provide for the long months that were ahead, and with our reduced retainers and scattered vassals, who were not too ready to respond to any tax at so perilous

and uncertain a time, such provision were a difficult matter to collect. Meanwhile, the priest, the cause of all this dire trouble, kept himself to his ill-tower, and what he busied himself about I neither knew nor cared, though I had suspicion that it was not for any good to the poor young earl. However, as warder of our hold, it was in my power and became my duty to call him to account for his misdeeds, had I wanted, or to make use of his services in case I needed them; and I resolved to try one last effort to get him to reduce his bitterness toward his nephew, and see if he would not use his influence to reduce the earl's perilous plight, when suddenly her ladyship the countess knocked all my plans on the head by coming out of her retirement and assuming the rule of the castle herself.

This became apparent one morning when I went down to give my orders for the day and see that all were secure, when the old armsman, a special favourite of the countess's, and as such no liker of me and my rule, who was ever, in small, petty ways, comparing me unfavourably with my brother, took no little delight in delivering his message.

"She saith," he cried, "her high ladyship saith to thee, Master Ian, tell him, she saith, that he may have part of meanest cur in this castle, what is left of bone and water, but naught more; and, moreover, she marvelleth that thou dost stay here, where thou art not wanted!"

"Thou old shambling fool," I cried, "thou ill

varlet, tell thy lady that, were it not that her son bade me stay, I would not be here now ! ”

“ Ho, ho ! varlet me not, thou Master Ian ! ” said the spiteful ancient, “ who hath a better right to my name than some I wot of. ”

“ How now, thou decrepit hound ! ” I cried, and in my rage I threatened him with my warder’s staff. “ Dost thou dare ? ”

“ Ho, ho ! we are high and mighty, ” he answered, showing his grinning, toothless gums ; “ and wouldst thou kill me also as thou hast the young earl ? ”

“ Varlet ! ” I cried in rage and shame, “ thou liest ! ”

“ ’Tis no lie, ” he answered impudently. “ The whole castle holdeth it true. ”

“ Thou tellest me this ? They believe this of me ? ” I said in my amazement.

“ Yea, ” he answered, “ that thou soldest him to the King. Yea, even the lady countess and the Lady Margaret Seton doth believe it. ” And he grinned at me with such a malicious leer that had he not been such a shambling, decrepit bit of mortality I think that in my rage I would have crushed him where he stood.

“ Go ! ” I cried, “ go and tell thy lady that my word to her son compels me to stay here ; but that beyond this she shall have no trouble of my presence. Now, go ! ” And I think that I forgot myself and his age, for he gave me but one look, and the malice died out

into such a look of craven terror in his face that I could not help but smile as he made his exit.

It was now worse than ever with me, now that I had naught to do but nurse my many troubles. Here I was, a pauper, disgraced and abhorred, in the walls of mine ancestors, and yet held by a bond of iron not to leave them. My one resource under other circumstances might have been the priest; but he, too, even forsook me. He came to my room one evening suddenly, and I was so surprised to see him, when he stood before me I could not speak. He looked much worn and aged, as if his mind troubled him, but held himself in his old calm manner. "I am going away for some time," he said, "and I want to say somewhat to thee, or I had not troubled thee with my presence."

"Away?" I cried; "away from here?"

"And why not?" he said bitterly. "Like thee, I am but an unwelcome encumbrance. Her ladyship must needs, since my lord's going, get her a new confessor, who is coming here in short time; so my work is ended."

"Great Heaven, man!" I cried, "thou art not so cruel and inhuman as to go from this place and leave these lone women as they are?"

"Yea, that I will," he answered. "Who are they to keep me here, when my spiritual work is ended? I have matters on hand, higher matters, that are more important than attending upon a sour old countess, who in temper is more man than woman; and confessing

a foolish girl who knoweth not her own mind, even for her own good."

"What meanest thou?" I cried. "The Lady Margaret, what of her?"

"Now keep thy reason, master clerk, or master armourer, or master warder, or sir earl. Which shall it be?" he cried sneeringly. "I have told thee often, with much truth, that this maiden is not for thee."

"I care not," I cried, "save that she may be true to my poor brother."

"And thou wouldst have me believe all that? What if I told thee more, that the girl——" here he paused maliciously. "Nay, thou blind fool and saintly brother, thou most magnanimous Esau, thou must mole thine own way through this matter. But I would say to thee, thy staying here hath not raised thy character in her eyes."

"I know it," I cried. "She despiseth me and detesteth me."

"And who would not?" he answered. "It is not in a young girl not to, when thou shuttest thyself up here, and thy brother in peril."

"And thou sayest that to me?" I cried. "Oh! what can I do? I will kill myself if harm cometh to him."

"Nay, thou fool, better come with me and accept my terms, and all this will be changed."

"And sell my brother, mine uncle Angus?" I cried.

"Then I am done with thee," he said, and he started to go.

"Stay!" I cried, "mine uncle! One moment! He is thy brother's son!"

"The more reason I should hate him," he answered.

"But hast thou no pity," I cried, "no feeling, no human feeling?"

"Feeling?" he answered, and he went white under his dark skin; "yea, I have feeling, Master Ian, and 'tis here!" and he pointed to his cheek. It was all he said, but I knew that mine argument was useless.

"Then go, thou vile kinsman," I said. "But I tell thee plain, for all thine ill-schemes, I will baulk thee yet." He turned and looked at me a moment, as if pondering; then he said, "Yea, 'tis best that thou shouldst stay here, where thou art least troublesome." Then he added, "Yea, thou mayst spoil my plans yet; but if thou dost so 'twill not be because of thy mother-wit, but rather by thy cursed folly." And with that he had passed out, and I saw him no more to speak to in this world.

I was now left entirely to mine own self and my poor resources in this lonely world of castle, mountain, moorland, and sea. Having none to speak to, shunned and suspected by all, it is no wonder that mine old manner of solitary dreaming and lonely love of sea and hillside came back to me once more. "Fate hath doomed me to a life of loneliness," I cried in my heart. "Nature only is true and kindly. Though she be

cruel, yet she hath a tenderness and a truth that is not to be found in mankind." And I found that solace in lonely walk by calm and restless wave and the desolate glen and lonely strath, which most men find in human companionship, friendship, and love.

I now took to my craftsmanship once more, and, after much failure and labour, constructed me a craft somewhat like that I had sent away with my friend the prisoner. With this boat I floated out from the little cove under the castle's foundation, and made me voyages of discovery. At first I thought at times that I should be wrecked or cast away; but by patience and perseverance I soon came to accustom myself to the water as to the land, and went on considerable cruises without knowledge of anyone, for no one cared whether I came or went. I also made journeys by land, skirting the shores and exploring the straths, and also went as far as the strath where I had formerly dwelt, but found the old huntsman was either dead or gone, for the place was deserted. Seeing that all here was desolate, I paid me a visit to my mother's grave, and I found to my surprise that the cairn was not only well preserved, but that the appearance of some fond care was evident. As I approached I noticed a strange man kneeling as if saying his prayers. He rose as I drew near, and looked at me without speaking. He was a great, wild-looking man, with long beard and hair, and a dark, fierce look, and there was somewhat about him that made me think that I had seen him or someone like him before.

“Who art thou,” I cried, “who dareth approach a strange grave? What dost thou here?”

He looked at me wonderingly for a moment; then he said—

“Her was a great leddy, as sleeps there; her was of a great people, her was.”

“What knowest thou of her who sleepeth here?” I cried, for I could not speak of my mother to a strange man, such as this was; though I marvelled much at what he had said.

“It is not for herself to say in the matter, but yon was a great leddy; herself haf served her people and herself’s fathers haf for many generations.”

Then amazement came over me. What could this strange man know of my mother? So I answered him, “Yea, she was of great line, of noble, of royal blood.” He looked at me as if not understanding; then he said, in a sort of fierce contempt—

“Kings, such as yon at Stirling! Such kings haf had honour to haf her fathers marry on their daughters.”

“Then why doth she sleep here, in this lonely place?” I asked.

“Oh! ’tis the sad story. But ’tis not for Tonalld to relate to a stranger of the Cattynes.”

“Then who sent ye here?” I asked.

“Who!” he answered. “Who, but her brother?”

“But who is he?” I cried.

“It is easy to see that thou art ignorant and close-reared not to know the man he is,” answered the strange

man. "And it is not for Tonalld to mention so great a name to a mere stranger in this place."

"Then who art thou?" I asked in exasperation.

"Oh! herself," he cried. "Herself is but Tonalld Payne, henchman and gillie to that great person who haf sent her here."

"Thou close savage," I cried in mine anger, "canst thou not speak me open?"

"And who is it who should require herself to speak more open on so grave a matter? It is herself who hath said more than she ought, and moreofer Tonalld is no safage; and if thou wantest any more it is Tonalld that can speak with the plade." But I was in no mood to cross blades with this wild Westerner, or islander, as he appeared to be; and I answered that I meant not to insult him. Then he said—

"Well, if it be not the plade that will answer, Tonalld haf stayed but too long; so herself will bid thee a good tay," and with much stiffness and precision of manner he took himself off.

As he went with great strides over the edge of the hill, and was lost to view, I marvelled who this man might be, and how much of all of this he said about my mother were true, and who this great person her brother could be, whom kings were honoured by being allied to through marriage. I knew in mine imperfect way, for the priest had told me, that there were great clans to the westward, whose chieftains rivalled our earls in power and pride of ancient line; and I supposed

that he must be one of these ; but which one, and where he could be found, was beyond my reach to know. So, taking a last fond look on the grave of her who had loved me so well, I retraced my steps homeward.

It was a beautiful afternoon of our early autumn, when our northern world hath begun to put on in its bleak way that glory and splendour of colour with which it becometh Mother Nature to deck her ere her death. Many sad thoughts were in my mind as I went, and I gazed upon the heather-clad hills and great dim mountains of the far west, and then turned mine eyes to the vast immensity of ocean to the north and east, which swept in its desolateness round the far lonesome rim of the world. There was a weird grandeur that appealed to my heart, so that even in my solitary sorrow I was raised to a better spirit and a higher mood for the moment, and forgot in this picture of desolate grandeur the great trouble of my life that beset me. I was going on in this way when I heard sounds of horses' feet, and, looking up, saw approaching near me the Lady Margaret, pacing on her palfrey, attended by one single armsman. At this sudden sight of her, who was ever in my thoughts, my heart seemed to stop, and then gave a great bound like as it were to burst. Then, as I looked up, our eyes met, and we both were for a moment like people caught sudden in some deep thought ; but she quick collected herself, and with but a cold salute of her shapely head, made as if to pass on. But the sight of her face, that

face that was ever with me in my dreams, looking so pale and wan, and regarding me with such cold hauteur of expression, drove me beyond myself, and I stepped to her side, and said—

“Lady Margaret, wilt thou not know me?”

“Sir,” she cried coldly, “I would pass on.”

“And what have I done that I should be treated thus? I am not the King, nor the Lord Albany, nor mine ill uncle, that I should be blamed for all this sad matter. I know that my lady countess accuseth me, but she hath ever hated me. All in the castle suspect and condemn me, and I care not,” I cried, “for them all, or for the whole world, for that matter; but I cannot stand it, my lady, that thou of all shouldst do likewise.”

“Sir,” she said a little softer—“sir, I do in truth sorrow for thee.”

“Lady,” I answered, “it is not sorrow I need, but justice! I care not for all these others, but that thou shouldst believe all this dishonour of me cuts me to the heart.”

“Sir,” she cried, “I had not thought this of thee!” and she started as if to pass on.

“What mean you?” I asked, for I liked not the way she spoke.

“Why,” she answered in scorn, “that thou shouldst be thinking of thy miserable affairs in the midst of so much danger to thy brother.”

“What danger?” I cried,

“Why, heardst thou not the news special messenger hath brought this day, that he—he”—here her voice broke to a sob, which she quickly checked—“is to be executed within the month?”

“Dread Heaven!” I answered. “This be too terrible!”

“And thou canst think of thine ills,” she said, “while such dread danger overhangeth him.”

“I knew it not,” I answered. “I have no knowledge, living as I do. I am but an outcast!” I cried. “Oh! what can be done? ’Tis the work of that cursed priest!”

“Priest or other,” she cried, “it shames my soul to be here talking to thee and he in such dread peril.”

Even then her manner hurt me, and I said, “I know well what thou dost mean. Would that I could help him and thee.”

“Thou knowest not all,” she cried, fiercely for her. “He was villainously ill-treated, deserted, sent to his death by us all—by us all! Even I—even I did not think of him as I should have. Yea, he was worth us all, every one of us. And we have let him go to his death.”

“Madam,” I cried, for her words cut me like a knife—“madam, you know not all.”

“Know!” she answered. “Tell me, thou, what to know, or what to do. Would I were a man! Oh! we women—we women!”

“Can the countess do naught?” I cried; for my wits

seemed to fail me in this strait, with her looking at me, or rather past me, with that high scorn and sorrow on her face, as though I were but nothing.

“His mother,” she answered. “Yea, she will do all she can, poor lady. But what of that? Dost thou not see that she were better to leave him alone? Everything she doth but maketh things worse. Her pride is her curse; even so, that be he murdered, ’tis she that hath helped him to it.”

“It was she and the priest,” I cried.

“The priest! What mean you?” she asked.

“He had an old hate,” I answered, “and a wrong or fancied wrong against my father’s house. You fine ladies know not how such ill rankles in us men.”

“And could wrath go so far in a man?” she said, and she looked at me so truly with her beautiful eyes, full of a sad wonder, that I could have wished myself my brother to have her sorrow for me.

“Nay, my lady,” I cried, “’twere but madness in a good man, did he give himself up to such a villainly hate.”

“And couldst thou do this?” she said. “I know that thou hast had much wrong.”

“Lady, believe me,” I cried, “I have had much wrong in this place, more than thou wilt ever know; but I would never forget, did he even stand betwixt me and, and——” here I paused, and she went red, then white.

“Say on, sirrah! Say on!” she cried.

"That he were my brother," I continued.

"Did I think that thou wert like that," she cried, "I would hate thee, I would scorn thee. But," she added, "these are all but brave words, Master Ian."

"Brave words are all I have," I answered; "I have naught else," I said sadly.

"Thou hast thy sword," she said, "and canst use it dost thou will."

"And what be that in a case like this, my lady? One hand and one blade can do but little."

"Lady me not!" she said in some bitterness. "I am but a poor girl in a sacked castle, with my betrothed at the foot of the scaffold. Dost thou know, Master Ian," she continued, "that I was but slow to wed him. But now would I wed him, were it at the block." And I know not why she said this, for she was ever proud and self-contained; but it struck me that this were the end of life.

"He, the one man in the world!" she continued, and she looked so beautiful and sad when she said it, that I gazed at her in wonder.

"I doubt it not," I answered stupidly. "But I am but a poor youth. What wouldst thou have me to do?"

"Do!" she cried. "Art thou blind? Art thou a stock? Hast thou no sense? What else shouldst thou do, but take me with thee to Stirling, where I may see his prison, and where I may go to this same Duke Albany, whom I understand is real king, and there on my knees beg him for his life." I looked my wonder

as she said this in her passion, and she may have read somewhat in my face, for she added, "Thou thinkest me unmaidenly, but God is witness I can do naught else."

"Nay, my lady," I answered, "thou wrongest my thoughts."

Then she said, "Thou fearest, then. But I have no fear with thee, sirrah, and that brave sword o' thine. Do I not remember? I will ne'er forget how brave thou wert, when thou slewest that man. Nay, nay, sir, with thee to squire me, I feel safe."

"Yea," I answered bitterly, "thou wilt but go and do a fool's part, and throw thyself into the lion's claws, and write the last word on thy lover's doom. When men see thee in thy youth and beauty——"

"Sir! Thou darest! Thou darest!"

"'Tis but true, my lady!" I cried. "For such as thee, men will do much, even to their soul's damnation."

"Sir, I did not think this of thee!" she answered.

"Oh! I matter not, madam," I cried. "I am out of thy life. But I speak the truth, whether thou likest it or not. This thy beauty of person, added to the knowledge of thy rank and wealth, will make men but too eager to slay thy lord and get thee. Nay," I continued, "it were but madness to go. Then thou hast a cruel enemy there; one who never forgetteth to avenge a hate. Against him and these others thou canst not prevail."

"Then what would thou have me do?" she asked in her despair.

"Do thou but stay here, where thou art safe with my lady. I have a plan."

"Speak! Speak, quick! What is thy plan?" she asked.

"'Tis but a poor one, but 'tis my best," I replied. "I will go myself."

"Thou!" she cried, as if in wonder, "thou! What couldst thou do?"

"'Tis but little that I can do, lady; but if I fail I can at least die," I answered in some bitterness. "Give me time to think," I continued. "There is time yet. God may send us a way."

"Heaven send He may," she answered, in her great sorrow. "And do you but save him——" she cried; but I stopped her there, for I knew that she would speak of reward.

"If I save him," I answered, "I save him not for all the kingdoms of this world or the next, but because he is my brother, and—and thy betrothed!" And I looked her in the face, who was all the kingdom I wanted, and which I was going to lose for evermore.

What there was she read in my face I know not, for it is not given to us to know the words that we may often speak with the soul to those whom we love, but she looked at me with a sort of amazement, as if she had then known me for the first time as I really was; then she dropped her eyes as she said—

“Pardon me, if I have insulted thee, my—my lord”
—here she stumbled, and then caught the right word—
“Master Ian.” But I bent my head to her as I said—

“My Lady Margaret, be as true in thy thoughts to me as I am to him whom we both love,” and I took her hand and kissed it, and ere I could lift mine eyes she had whipped up her horse and was gone.

And I stood there alone on the great bleak northern shore, with the land on the one side and the sea on the other like unto that wondrous picture given of the last great day in the Holy Gospeller I had read from of late, in a great black-letter book I had found. And I felt a new life and a new manhood come into my heart. Whether she or God had put it there, or both, I know not; but an idea had sprung into my heart and a scheme into my mind that I would give up my life for them both.

CHAPTER XXIII

IT was a wild and rash thought, this idea of mine to die for my brother. How it came into the mind of a youth such as I was, God only knows ; but I could see no other way out save by such a desperate resolve. All good impulses and reasons were guiding me to it. She loved him, and he was my brother. I could never live and be happy knowing that he died alone, away off there, without my hand lifted to save him ; and I could never have her, and she was the only woman in the world for me. So that there was to my mind, placed as I was, lost to all I should have been, and by no fault of theirs or mine, but one way out of the whole dread matter. Then they might yet be happy, though I could never be. This all decided me that there was but one thing in this world for me to do, and to do it well.

This thought possessed me like wine does a drunkard, and kept me in sleep and waking ; but how to accomplish it were another matter. Here was I, a lonely youth, in a remote part of the northern country, and the place I wanted to reach where my brother lay in that dread prison was far off, as I understood, many

days' journey to the southward, out beyond the grim Sutherland mountains, that formed so forbidding a barrier betwixt our land and the great country beyond them. Added to this, the autumn was now well advanced, and if I did not soon start on my journey my way later would be blocked by the thousand difficulties inherent to the inclement season. And how was I, a poor untutored youth, who had travelled but little, to find my road and keep me amid the myriad dangers that beset even the most experienced travellers? It was true that I had my sword, and in my rude way could use it, but that is not much, as many a poor lad hath found out ere now. I was at my wits' end to know how to proceed. It were of no use, I knew, to apply to the countess. She would only scorn me, and think it but some scheme on my part to further complete the destruction of her son and the alienation of the possessions of her house. I thought it out all that night, but as it seemed to no purpose, and next morning I went down to take a dip in the sea, as had been my custom of late. As I was coming out, the sight of the craft I had built gave me a sudden thought. "What a fool I have been!" I cried. "I will try my friend the wild lord," whom I had aided to escape, for I now remembered with a sudden impulse how he had promised to come to my aid did I but ask him.

With a new hope in my soul, I hastened to my room and got out the stone which he had given me, and which was to be the signal on my part that I was in

need of him. It was a strange, greenish-coloured stone, with some ancient marks upon one side, that made it look not unlike what is called an amulet, such as folk wear on their necks for charms. But I thought naught of its other secret qualities, except to put it to its one use of getting aid from him whom I had helped. Then I thought me that there was no time to lose, and that if I waited to get word from him before he knew the nature of my trouble, it would be too late to carry out my purpose. So I decided that it were best to send him word of the necessity of my making this journey; and that if he got the one he would get the other at the same time. So I sat me down, and getting me a piece of parchment, wrote as follows:—

“He of Girnigoe who helped a prisoner to escape is in great extremity to get to the Royal Castle at Stirling, on immediate business of life and death. Without means, or knowledge of the way to go, he sendeth this stone back to him who gave it.” This I placed in a package with the stone, and buckling on my sword, as was my wont in taking my rambles, left the castle, and went in search of the square stone on the summit of the bare hill. This from his description was half-way up a small strath to the west of the castle. After much search I found the stone, which stood in a desolate part of the glen, and which looked by its shape and peculiar situation to have been placed there by human means. I have since been told that it was an ancient altar where some of our Norse or

Celtic ancestors used to make their sacrifices in their rude heathen manner. Placing the packet in the hollow he had described, which was also an artificial cavity made for some purpose, I departed with little hope in my heart that anything would come of the matter, and determined, if I got no word, to go openly to the countess and beg means and a companion to guide me to Stirling; though the truth was that so small was our garrison, that I felt that it would be scarcely right to rob it of one of its defenders, even for so important a purpose. As I was not to receive any answer until the next evening, I went back to the castle and began to make what preparations might be necessary for my journey. I also had some doubt whether the late prisoner had that clerkly knowledge which might enable him to decipher my letter, but I thought me that if he were the powerful man he boasted to be, he might have either received that culture himself, or else would have clerks in his household or retainership qualified for that office.

When I reached my chamber, a surprise awaited me, for I found a packet neatly done up, and opening it I found a letter and another packet inside, both addressed to "Master Ian of the Orcades," a strange designation, I thought. The letter was addressed in a fine, delicate, clerkly hand, and proved to be from the Lady Margaret Seton. I could not help but press it to my lips, and weep over it, man as I was; for what betwixt my dread resolve, which had worked me up to

a sort of unnatural state, and the sight of her writing, with the message she sent, the first I had ever got in this world from anyone, and the last, as I knew it would be, from her, who alone made this world bearable, I was quite unmanned for the time. Recovering myself I read it, and it ran as follows:—

“MASTER IAN, I send thee this, mine all which I have by me. Use it for the purpose we both wot of. My palfrey will be given you, with proper equipment, by my groom. Quick speed! and God go with you!—

“MARGARET SETON.”

With it was another note couched in quite another tone, not so well writ, but full of scorn for me.

“SIR,” it ran, “the Lady Margaret Seton hath informed me (by what knowledge I know not) that it is thy will to leave us in this our poor plight, illy garrisoned as we now are. It is ever the way of the coward, as thou knowest, to leave when the danger is near; but I will not keep thee, seeing thou wouldst be of little use, and but a sore in mine eyes, as thou hast ever been. Shun pride and treachery, and perchance Heaven will forgive thee thy sins, and bring thee to that proper sense of thy base origin, which Isabella, Countess of the Cattynes, can never do, nor ever come unto this castle again.”

There was no signature, but it needed none. The poor countess, she little knew that Fate was stronger than

her sad ill-will, or of how I was to come back finally, and of all that was to befall us in the meanwhile. But her old pride and strong hatred of me was her main thought, and, poor lady, next to her love for her son, for which alone I forgive her all else, her chief passion was her pride and her hatred of me. And, indeed, of all women I have ever known, she was, by far, the strongest and most enduring in her hate.

I opened the packet, and out fell a curiously worked bag of delicate steel network, filled with pieces of gold, which shone in the sunlight, like gleaming fish new-caught in a net; and after it fell a beautiful richly wrought golden chain, set with rare gems. I knew them as those which I had seen her wear on state occasions, and that she valued them most highly, and for all my mastery of myself to be true to Hugh, I could not but sigh at this evidence of her love for him.

The lady countess's letter I answered in the following words, ere I burnt it—

“MADAM,—Thou hast ever seen fit to withhold from me that regard which thou hast given even to the dogs about thee. As it is not likely that we will ever meet again, I would simply say that for all thine ill thoughts of me I have ever tried to be true to thee and thine as becometh an honest man in a wicked world.”

The Lady Margaret's letter, which went with its contents in a packet next my heart, to be treasured for ever, all my life long, I answered as follows :—

“MY LADY,—The treasures thou hast sent me will be put to the best use for that purpose dearest to us both in this world. My hope is to leave this ere thou gettest this message. May Heaven bless thee is the wish and hope of
MASTER IAN.”

It would be hard to explain in our slight knowledge of words what my feelings were, whilst writing this short note, for there are thoughts that do come to us, which are often but too sacred to find utterance for in the language of men ; and this love of a man for a maid is a strange and dread matter, and one to be wondered at and admired more than all other passions in God's creation. It taketh hold of one with such a clutch at the heart and such a tyranny and mastery of the whole being, that it seemeth to hallow all life, giving a beauty to our meanest actions, and casting a glamour as of magic over all that she is, or hath, or that bringeth to our notice or remembrance thoughts of her person, her voice, or her face. 'Tis a sweet madness, and the rarest and divinest that this world hath ever known or ever will know, and hath more to do with the ennobling of a good man than all the “thou shalt nots,” and priestly creeds that infest this world.

Having writ these letters, which I spent some time over, being but an indifferent scribe, as I even now am, I placed them aside, and busied myself with mine other preparations, which, having completed, I spent the rest of my time that night and next morning waiting with

doubtful impatience until the time should arrive when I should go to the stone in the glen for mine answer.

It was approaching dusk on the following evening as I set out to receive my message. There was a mist gathering in from the sea, and with it a danger that I might lose my way did it fall too close and heavy; so I hurried me along the shore, where the tide struck hoarse and sullen with a roar and wash on the rocks and sands, though not so loud or with such force as when there was a storm, when the whole world was loud with the great boom and din of the incoming surf and the leaping spume that broke in wild madness on the reefs and skerries of our northern coast. But as I went, the sea rolled and crested with a sullen motion as of a great shining serpent, coiling and uncoiling in its sleep. I hurried on, however, not thinking of the sea, or the waves, or the rocks, or the grey sky, but of myself and my cares, and the doubtfulness of my getting any answer to the message I had sent. Thinking these mingled thoughts, I turned up the lonely strath, and ere I realised had arrived at the ancient stone. The mist was now blowing in, grey and fleece-like, and coming down in great skeins and webs of windy rain, so as to veil like a dense shroud the lonely world. But I could see enough to make out that there was no one awaiting me at the stone. I went and put my hand in the hollow to find the package, but to my astonishment it was gone. With a beating heart I stood there, undecided whether

to go back or wait awhile longer, when I heard a muffled voice, and a giant form seemed to loom out of the grey mist, and stood before me ; and I knew him at once for the wild Westerner whom I had met at my mother's grave.

Not noticing my astonishment, he said quietly, "What wilt thou haf with Tonalld ?"

"I know not if thou art the man," I cried. "I placed a token in yonder stone, and it is gone. Didst thou take it?"

He quietly took it from his sporan, and held it out without a word.

"It is mine," I cried, taking it from him. Then he spoke in his strange, impersonal manner.

"Herself went to him, and he saith that herself will meet thee at this place by sunrise the morrow for to make thy journey southward."

"Who is this man you speak of ?" I cried, "for I would know more of him."

"And who else would he be but the fiar ?" he answered.

"But it is not for herself to stay long in a strange place. Wilt thou come at that time herself hath stated ?"

"I will be here," I cried. "You may expect me."

"And herself will have a nag for thee. For it is long and a weary way, as herself knows," he answered.

"I will meet thee, then, at sunrise," I said, and ere I had finished the words he had melted as it were into the fog, as a mirage or shadow may disappear, and I wended my way back to Girnigoe in a new condition of doubt, hope, and wonder as to this gathering maze of mystery that was wrapped about my life.

CHAPTER XXIV

I LEFT Castle Girnigoe next morning before sunrise, and, as I believed, for the last time, and it was with a sad heart, which might surprise some, who knew all I had suffered of sorrow and despite at the hands of others therein.

The night before I had managed to get speech with the man whom the countess had made warden or chamberlain to the castle. He was a bluff, sturdy, not unkindly man, and when I told him of my intended departure, and of my fear for the welfare of those I was leaving behind, he assured me that so long as a wall remained he would see that all therein were as safe as the rock of Girnigoe itself. This gave me much comfort, seeing that the man was one in whose word I could place trust by reason of his honest face, firm mouth, and bold, unflinching eyes. So that in this regard I had no fear did mine own plans but work as satisfactorily. I also had given this man the letters I had indited, to be handed to the ladies next morning after my departure.

I set out on foot, for Donald's promise of a nag had removed any need of my taking the Lady Margaret's palfrey. This was much to my satisfaction, as I knew

this beast was one to which she was much attached, and it was some comfort to leave behind to her this part of her belongings. I stood for awhile, after leaving the castle, admiring its bold, rugged outlines of wall and keep, looming there amid its wide expanse of peaceful ocean, mountain, and shoreland, sleeping under the morning light. For I knew that I was taking my last look of all this scene of my sorrow and my hope, and of her who was the world in all to me; and with a prayer in my heart for the gentle soul who dwelt there, I choked a rising sob and addressed myself to my journey.

I arrived in good time at the stone, and there found the silent and cautious Donald, accompanied by the nag, the latter of which I soon mounted, and with Donald running or walking by my side, or a little in front, according to the nature of the road we went, proceeded on my journey to the far southward. He told me in few words that we were to travel for some days through the country of the Cattynes, and beyond the mountains of the Sutherland country, where we were to meet with the fiar, who himself was to proceed with me on my journey.

It availeth not that I should describe this long, toilsome journey that I underwent. As all men do know, our castle standeth on the rugged front of a great cape that lieth out to the North Sea, which cape is the extreme end of a great portion of land reaching from the main body of that country which maketh the northern part of the land called Scotland. The journey

for the first few days lay through what is called mine own country, that of the Cattynes—a land of much bogs and wetlands, with hill and lake dotted through in places, and here and there a strath, where men may go with more ease, and rest them near some great cliff or mountain stream at nightfall. But withal it is mine own land, it has much of a flatness and tameness of appearance, and lacketh that beauty and desolate grandeur which are to be found in the great country of the southland beyond us. Crossing this country, we came on the third even to the neighbouring land of the Sutherland and the Mackay. Here we got into a beautiful inland part of the world, where the glens ran betwixt high mountains, and the path was often most difficult to find, and the climber would almost seem to hang from the rugged precipice we had to cross. Of this our journey I may say little, as I was myself but ill-minded for speech, and if I had been so inclined I would have found Donald to be the most silent man of his kind in the world. He could walk or trot for days without a word, save a question as to whether I were weary, or whether I should go on ; and when we had found a fit place for the night, would wrap him in his plaid and fall asleep in a grim silence, which to some would have seemed ominous. So we journeyed, I and this silent Westerner, until on the fourth even we arrived at the side of a small mountain lake of most beautiful appearance, and surrounded by shores as desolate in their grandeur as though unmolested by

the hand of man since the beginning of time. Here he stayed for a space, then giving a peculiar call, after a short time of waiting we saw a boat coming around a bend in the land, and moving toward us. Leaving my nag to be fetched, I got into the boat with Donald and one of the men, who looked and acted with the same severe, silent manner as the former; and in a short time we were speeding across the water as fast as stout arms could propel us. Turning a point, we landed on a shelving beach, under a great cliff; and there I perceived a solitary hut. From the door as we advanced issued a tall, commanding figure, who, for all his altered appearance and martial bearing, I knew at once to be the unfortunate prisoner whom I had released from the dungeon of Castle Girnigoe.

“Thou art come at last!” he cried. And he grasped my hand with a warmth and kindliness of greeting that showed his remembrance of my deed. But I noticed also that there was a deeper meaning in his friendship for me than was generally shown by so stern and silent a man, for there was a wild fierceness and pride of bearing about him that would have made most men fear him.

He led me to the hut, where a meal was soon supplied us, rude but plentiful, and of which, after my long journey and course of simple fare, I was glad to partake. When the meal was finished there was an awkward pause, at least on my part, for I felt as though each of us wanted to speak on matters on which both were doubtful as to the opinion of the other. As I could

now see, he was of no common rank, but my service to him and mine own need of aid in my project gave me courage to break the silence.

“Thou hast come at last into thine own again, fiar,” I said, giving him the title he probably carried as lord or chief of a great clan.

“Yea,” he answered; “I got mine ill cousin Roderick front to front under the skies, where we were alone; my claymore met his, and he now sleeps with his fathers.”

“And thy wife and children?” I questioned.

“My Lady Morna, she is dead,” he answered. “But my son Torquil thou wilt see for thyself, for is he not thine own cousin?”

“My cousin?” I cried in some wonder. “Then thou art mine uncle?”

“Yea, as true as that thou art that Ian, rightful Earl of the Cattynes and of the Orcades,” he answered.

“Then thou knowest that?” I cried. For all he had told me startled me somewhat.

“’Tis full time,” he answered, “that thou shouldst know what I can tell thee. Hearken then, my nephew, to these my words! I am the MacLeod of that ilk, of a lineage longer than man can remember, great in this land and in a land to the west. I had but one sister, and she was thy mother. She was a maiden beautiful and well nurtured, as becometh the women of our ancient line, when this Ian, thy father, bore her off from my castle and married her. Their love for each other was a true and fond one, but this earl had

an ill-gotten brother, a priest, as thou knowest, who by some devil's art persuaded thy father that, seeing my house had shown honour to these present kings of this land by marrying on a daughter of that line, and that thy father's house had done likewise, therefore thy father and my sister were cousins, and, as he declared, within that degree of blood prohibited by Holy Church wherein kin of the same blood should marry. Now this was no truth, seeing that the kinship was not near ; but this same priest—may God punish him, seeing man may not—for some devil's reason of his own, worked on thy father the earl's fear and his ambition to connect him with this house of the Douglas, so that by much scheming and plotting he procured a command from the Holy Father, setting my sister aside, and for which matter she would never in her shame return home, but lived and died in a lone place, far away from the land of her birth and her kin ; and this coming to mine ears, I would have brought the earl thy father to a sharp account, but he and my cousin, that same who is now dead, connived so cleverly that they laid me by the heels in that dark, ill dungeon where thou didst find me ; and 'twas a devil's trick for a man to play his own wife's brother ! ” he continued.

“ He is dead now,” I cried.

“ Then is it good both for him and the MacLeod,” he returned. “ And thou, my nephew then, thou art the Earl of the Cattynes, and thou shalt have thy rights and thine earldom. Thou wilt come with me to

the Court at Stirling, and we will see what can be done to put thee in thy proper place."

"But I have a brother," I cried, "who sitteth in my place ; but he is now in prison in that same Stirling, for treason, sentenced to death."

"Then is it the better for thee," he answered. "Thou wilt come into thine own. Thou art of my blood and my sister's son ; and I will see thee righted !"

"Hearken, mine uncle," I answered, "for such I may now call thee, there is much more in all this matter than thou knowest. It is true that by my mother's memory I am, as thou sayest, the true Earl of the Orcades and the Cattynes ; but mine is a long story, and a hard one, and I beg thee to hearken to what I say ; for I tell thee frankly that this can never be ; nor would I dispossess my brother, if I could, but I cannot."

"By the souls of mine ancestors !" he cried in wrath, "what meanest thou ?"

"'Tis even as I say," I answered. "I thank thee for thy proffered aid ; but Earl of the Cattynes I can never be !"

"Wilt thou let this other son, this usurper, ride over thee and possess thy rights ? Thou art mad !" he cried, and he rose and paced up and down in some agitation.

"First," I answered, "this Pope's annulment doth stand in my way. In the eyes of the world I have no standing," I cried.

"Thou hast ! Thou hast !" he returned fiercely. "And by my sister's honour, with this same blade will

I write thee a patent, which not even the royal Robert himself shall dare impugn ! ”

“ Yea,” I cried, “ thou wouldst give me my place by force. But how long could I keep it ? But there is somewhat more, mine uncle, and as thou lovest me, hearken to what I would tell thee.” And I related in short what I have here set down of my will in the matter toward my brother, saving alone mine own secret scheme to save him ; for I feared to reveal it, lest he, by force or stratagem, might prevent my carrying it out.

“ My nephew,” he cried, when I had concluded, “ this lieth not in mind of man. Thou art a madman ! This hath not been hitherto known in our family, that one man should shut himself off for another, as thou wouldst do. Art thou truly willed to carry this out ? ”

“ Yea, I am,” I cried.

“ Then,” he answered, “ in thy mother’s name I say to thee, thou fool, that I forbid thee, and will oppose this for thine own good to the bitter end ! ”

“ I defy thee ! ” I cried in some indignation and anger. “ Is it thus thou wouldst requite mine aid who got thee out of Girnigoe ? Hast thou no bowels of compassion ? When I saved thee, did I know who thou wert ? Nay, save that thou wert in ill case and prisoned wrongfully. And wilt thou, then, see this young man, my father’s son, who is trapped, as thou wert, to his death, who is innocent of all sin against me, wilt thou see him in similar case to thine, and not have me aid him ? Wouldst thou have me a man

forsworn in his honour as a traitor to the blood and the house that gave him shelter? If thou wouldst, then thou knowest me not!" And I took his stone that he had given me, and hurled it from me. "Take back thy pledge, thou forsworn man, MacLeod or no!" I cried.

I think he thought me mad, or beyond his ken. He looked at me a moment as I stood glaring at him. Then he said quietly, picking up the stone—

"There is more in all this than thou hast told me; but be thou minded to this I will see thee through. Thou art a MacLeod in this matter, that thy will may not be changed even for a folly. I will see thee through; but it misdoubts me that thou art a fool."

"Then thou wilt go with me to Stirling?" I cried.

"My word is given!" he answered. "But what wouldst thou do there?"

"I would get entrance and speech with my brother in his prison," I answered, "and carry him message of comfort."

"'Tis a hard matter to manage; but it shall be done."

"Then we must go soon," I cried; "for the time is but short."

"What meanest thou?" he asked.

"He is doomed within the month," I answered.

"Then, young man," said the MacLeod, "thou hast set to thee a desperate work, for thou wilt have short time to save him if thou canst, which thou canst not."

“God send that I get there in time!” I answered, “or I am a lost man,” and I thought me of the Lady Margaret and my rash promise.

“We may get there in short time, my rash nephew; but little good wilt thou bring to this same brother o’ thine. He will hang all the same, and thou be Earl of the Cattynes, even against thy will. But we must start this even, for we have a long road and a rough, and thou wilt be late as it is.”

It needeth not that I should relate the long, wearisome journey we made by land and water, or that I should describe the rare and grand country that we passed through. Nor have I time to describe the noble castles and grim holds that caught our eyes, or the beautiful vales and lonely mountains, the vast rivers and lochs that we skirted or crossed. My mind was so taken up by the fear that I should arrive too late, or that my mission might be of no avail when I got there, that I could think of naught else, and the whole journey, beautiful and strange as it was, lingers still in my mind as but a vague dream of loch and mountain, such as one might fancy in a morning sleep; and it was with a glad relief that I first set eyes on the lofty battlements of the great keep of Stirling, which rose above its castled crags of olden fame of the mighty Bruce, with its clustered town clinging in quaint roofs and chimneys at its feet.

There was some sort of fête afoot in the old town as we entered its gates, I on horseback and mine uncle on

foot, because for his own schemes he was dressed in disguise, representing the character of one of his own gillies or henchmen, which but ill hid his stern look of power and presence of lordly command. All this bustle of life, and sight of many houses, with busy and crowded streets, would, at any other time, have attracted me, as a new and uncommon experience ; but at this time I could only think of this place as the prison of my sad-fated brother, and the people as those who were his keepers and destroyers ; so I kept my face set before me, and looked on the distant bastioned keep on the hillside, and wondered in what part and in what grim cell they had him confined, and in what manner he would receive me and my determination to free him. We went by side-streets to a quiet inn, which mine uncle did wot of, where he had a friend in the inn-keeper, who was kindly for many reasons to men of the Highlands, and especially toward his house and clan. Here we put up for the night, and mine host, a slow but thoughtful and silent man, gave me a quiet room and a good bed, for which I was glad, and to which I retired early ; for I was worn with my journey, and I had much to think of and to accomplish on the morrow. Bidding me to get what rest I could, mine uncle went out to set his plans in action for the getting of me into presence with my brother, the Earl of the Cattynes, who, it was well known in the town, was, for high treason against his liege lord and king, under watch and ward in the great castle above.

CHAPTER XXV

ON the next even mine uncle came to my room, and told me that he had got, by much trouble, leave for a henchman of the young earl to see him alone in his prison. This was granted by the governor of the castle ; and he added that the Duke of Albany was expected hourly, and that on his arrival it was surmised that the young earl would be executed, as rumours of his defiance and rank treason had been brought of late from the earl's country, and there was no hope of any reprieve being granted. Of course, I knew that this latter was the ill-work of mine uncle the priest ; but the news only steeled me all the more to undergo the fate I had marked out for myself. My great trouble, however, was how to get him off when independent of the castle ; for I could not trust anyone, and it was impossible to let mine uncle the MacLeod into the secret of my plans, which he would have interrupted at once. Therefore I had employed my day hunting about the old town for some means of carrying out my purpose, and after some search and trouble I discovered at last another inn, remote from where we were quartered, happily kept by a man of

the Cattynes, who was not above the love of gold pieces, as all of his guild are not; and who, much as he would do for gold, I found out was also willing to do much for a man of his own country. I soon arranged with him for a guide, and a sturdy nag to ride that night to the north, for a brother of mine, I told him, who would arrive after dark from the south, and was in haste to press his journey northward. He warned me that the travelling was risky in that direction; but I answered that a Cattynes man cared not for danger, as he knew; and that the service was for a friend. So, in short, seeing my gold, he declared with many oaths that a Cattynes man had a right to help his friends, to which I agreed. Thus, having made this assignation, and getting its proper direction for my brother, I hired a small cateran for a fee, who showed me the road to and from the castle gates. This I had done during the daytime, hoping to get all in train for my purpose that night, and doing it all in a matter-of-fact way, as if I were not all this time preparing for mine own execution. All this, of course, I managed under pretence to mine uncle of being out studying the town, while he had been absent getting my warrant of admission to the castle prison.

“Here,” he said, “my mad nephew, is thy right of admission, signed by the governor, and as thou art to go in the character of a henchman, I have procured for thee the proper dress.” I took the warrant from his hands with the feelings of one who knows that it

is the writ of his own death ; but the road was trodden now, and I could not, nor would, go back. As my uncle had said, I was mad. It took me not long to get into the clothes he had provided, and buckling on my great sword, I bid mine uncle good even, and issued forth. I felt it but an ill-return for all his kindness, to leave him thus when it was exceedingly doubtful that I should ever see him again ; but this matter I had undertaken allowed of no small scruples of feeling. I thought of the Lady Margaret and my poor brother, and I went on ; for I was afraid that any words of mine might reveal my design.

It was a dark night, and I had some trouble to find my way. But near my Cattynes inn I found my small gillie awaiting me, who was to lead me to the castle, and my supposed self back to the inn. I said but little to him, but wrapped myself as closely as I could in my cloak, and followed him up the great hill, which led to the many-bastioned citadel. When I arrived at the front of the entrance, I bade my lad await me there, as I would in all probability be some time ; and getting ready my warrant, I approached the entrance. The warden was at first unwilling to give me entrance on any terms ; but seeing my paper, his manner changed.

“ ’Tis unusual to let visitors in at this time o’ night,” he said, “ but this is a special warrant, and thou art his squire, art thou not ? ” he said, but with some surliness. “ And thou hast come all the way from

his country to see him swing, as he will, from yon beam to-morrow."

"How now?" I cried in horror. "So soon! What mean you?" and I could not help it, but a sense of dread overcame me.

"Yea, my master," the man answered, "the great Albany hath been here these two hours; and word hath gone forth of thy lord's execution on the morrow's morn!"

A cold chill went all through me. I had screwed up my courage to expect something like this; but the brutal and sudden manner of his telling it made me quail for the first time since the undertaking of my adventure. But I remembered her, who was even now praying for me and expecting me to be brave; and I stayed my courage and pulled myself together, and followed him within those grim, forbidding gates, which I felt I would never more go out of, save to my death. Then a quick thought came to me, and I said to my guide, "Doth the young lord know that his end cometh so soon?"

"Nay! Nor why should he?" he answered with a grim smile. "He will know soon enough the morrow's morn."

Summoning a grim old keeper from somewhere within, and who came shambling up, he gave me into his charge. This old seneschal was a hardened-looking ruffian enough, as though the long care of prisoned men, and the guarding of them in those grim cells,

and the leading of them to death, had seared his soul and face into a stupid brutality. Taking from a great iron hook, in the cell he occupied, a bunch of ponderous keys, he lighted a torch and led me through long, dread, gloomy stone passages, where now and again I saw doors, as I passed, of massive oak and rusted iron, which led, no doubt, to cells like that one where he was now taking me. As we passed I also saw, as in a half-dream in the flare of the torch, strange engines of torture, rusted swords and blocks for execution; all of which gave me a strange horror of the place. But I had not long to dwell on these matters, for we soon came to a low, heavy-built arch of grey stone, under which was a ponderous wooden door, fastened in a formidable manner with bar and bolt and chain. Pulling the bolt, and unloosing the chain, and swinging with a slow, grim motion the door backward, he bade me enter. Then telling me to rap twice, and he would release me, he slammed the door on me in a surly manner, and I found me in the room alone.

There was something in all this grim place that gave me a nameless horror, as of cruelty and misery, and lack of liberty, and of death in its most slow or hideous forms; all of which had power to unnerve me, and for the moment when that brutal keeper slammed to that terrible door there came to me a feeling of great longing for open sky and air, and sweet earth, and a despair of ever seeing them any more. Such a hopelessness doth come over all prisoners at a moment like

this ; but remembering my duty I stepped forth into the room. There was a dim wick of some sort burning in an iron lamp, which gave a flickering light throughout the apartment ; which, I afterward learned, was one reserved for prisoners of State. It was a room of lofty roof, where the day came dimly through gratings not to be reached save by the eye. The walls were gloomy and bare, and a few articles of ancient oak furniture were ranged about as if adding a grim resemblance to comfort and habitation to so gruesome and dread an apartment. There was at one side a narrow couch, and in the centre stood a massive oaken table, while by it a rude chair ; and there near it in the middle of the room I stood face to face with my brother Hugh.

“ Who art thou ? ” he cried in stern tones. But I noticed that underneath his sternness there was a sense of foreboding he was illy trying to hide ; for prisoners in places such as that could not tell the day or the hour when they might go forth to their death, nor could they know but that any messenger was either an attendant to execution or an assassin come to do his grim work in their cell. “ Who art thou ? ” he repeated. But I was so astonished at his changed appearance that for the moment I could not find words. For he was worn and white, and the high courage all gone out of him, save that innate nobleness he could not lose ; and I further noticed that he had a look and carriage as of one in pain.

“My lord earl,” I cried, “dost thou not know me, thy brother Ian?”

“Nay!” he cried. “Thou! Thou here?” And he sat down, for the surprise seemed to overcome him in his altered state. “And what for?” he continued. “And how are they? And how is she?”

“’Tis she that hath sent me,” I answered; “and she is well.”

“I might have known it,” he said, recovering somewhat of his former spirit. “God bless her! And my poor mother, what of her?”

“Well as she can be, and thou here, for she, like the other, is breaking her heart for thee in thy danger.”

“I know it! I know it!” he cried. “Yet they may grieve in vain! These devils, mine uncle and Albany, have cooped me up here to my death. Were I but out for one month I might get interest with my mother’s folk. But here I am powerless, and I know well, though I hear naught, that they mean my death.”

Now here was my chance to work my plan; for I was but waiting for some excuse to introduce it to him, but I said, “Thou lookest ill, my brother; art thou not wounded?”

“’Tis but a scratch,” he said, “in my side; but it hath not healed properly. In this devil’s place naught will heal. ’Tis a cursed cell, which adds its horror to the horror of death, which it anticipates by its grimness.”

“Hath none visited thee?” I asked.

“Yea, my brother!” he said. “I had one visit

from my villainous uncle. Wouldst thou believe it, that devil had audacity to come here under plea of fear for my soul? But I felt that it was only to gloat over my condition. So I spurned him and treated him as though he were the fiend himself." Then he turned to me, and said, almost fiercely, "And thou, my brother, hadst thou naught to do with my coming here?"

"Nay, Hugh," I answered, "else why would I be here now?" and with a right good conscience I told him the one great lie of my life; for it angered my spirit that this noble young man, my brother, should be thus kept ignorant of his terrible doom on the morrow.

"Hugh," I cried, "thou hast wished for chance to retrieve thyself, to get back thy former position and liberty if thou couldst but get from here for one month. Then know you that I have come here to give thee that one chance!"

"Dread Heaven! play not with me!" he cried. "Thou! thou meanest this?"

"Doubt me not!" I cried. "And I tell thee plain 'tis she hath sent me. 'Tis for her I have come. Hugh, my brother, she dieth for thee in thine absence, as doth thy mother; and I have come here purposing to take thy place, that thou mightest go back to them, and wreck these plotters."

"Can this be?" he cried. "Thou, Ian! thou take my place! 'Tis madness! 'Tis madness!" and he rose up and paced the cell in great agitation.

"Not such madness as you think," I answered. "We are much of a size and likeness enough to deceive these jailers. I have all ready for the scheme. Thou canst by morrow morn be well out of their clutches."

"Yea," he said, facing me, with a strange eagerness and wonder on his face; "yea, I would be well! But thou, Ian, what of thee?" he cried.

Then I lied. "Hugh," I cried, "in one month the great Albany cometh here," and as I said this I could not help but dwell on the horrid system that kept a prisoner such as he was in ignorance of the great world about him.

"Yea," he answered, "and that meaneth my death!"

"Then," I cried, "thou hast that one month, in which much can be done. My plan is this: 'tis a simple and safe one. I will stay here and take your place, and thou canst go forth a free man, and get thee to thy castle, or to the house of thy mother's folk; make good your cause with the King, and retrieve your position; and if you are not able to do so, you can but come back here and give yourself up in my stead."

He looked at me in a strange way. Then he said, "And thou hast planned all this? Thou? I cannot believe that thou couldst be so noble."

"Nay," I answered, "my brother, it is for her sake that I have done this, as thou also must do thy part in this for her sake."

"Ian," he cried, "thou art better than I! God

bless thee for this ; and yet thy plan is a good and a wise one. In one month, in shorter, I will have the Douglas at my back ; I will get the King's ear ! My mother and I can do it ! When I am master of mine own again, I will reward thee, and she also shall thank thee."

"I want naught but thy love, my brother," I cried, "But the time is short, and thou needst all thy wit to carry this plan which we have before us." Then we made haste and exchanged clothes ; he to wear those of freedom and hope, and I to put on, as I well knew, those of despair and death. I next warned him to say little, and to keep his cloak close about him, as I had done ; to hail and follow the gillie to the inn, which I described, and thence get off as speedily as possible to the north.

"Never fear for me, my brother," he said. "I know the road well, and I will soon be back for thy release, or else to take thy place."

"Hugh," I answered, "take her my love. Tell her I did this for you both. She will understand ; and may you both be happy." Then I gave the two knocks, my sign of release to the warder, as he buckled on my great sword, and I shoved him out.

"Go !" I whispered, "or all is lost at the last !" I believe he weakened, and would have refused to go ; but it was too late. The grim jailer appeared and led him out, and the ominous door clanged, and I was shut out from the world of men until I should

go out next morning to my grim fate, and a grim one it was indeed, as if in mockery of my hopes and rights, to die, at least, where I might not live, as the most potent the Earl of the Orcades and the Cattynes.

When the door had closed with that harsh, ominous sound, and I was alone by myself in this living tomb, which seemed to me to be but, as it were, the ante-room to that real one to which all must come sooner or later, a cold shudder came over me at realisation of what I had done to myself. Then I cried that I were a coward to think such dastard thoughts when I knew that she, weak, tender, delicate-nurtured girl that she was, would have gone willingly to a worse doom for his sake ; and could not I, a man, do at least as much and die for them both ? Then followed a more dreadful thought, a fear that he might bungle his part and spoil my scheme, and but add my death to his own. As to my uncle the MacLeod, I knew it would be as the event proved, he would wonder at my not returning, and, suspecting some danger, would come to the castle and hear of my exit. Then he would lose sight of me, never dreaming the real condition of affairs. So it happened. But I had mine own part to play, and a dread one it was. So, with a grim resolve, I commended my soul to Heaven, and with sleepless eyes addressed me to the gloom of my long night's vigil to await that dawn which should usher my soul to heaven.

CHAPTER XXVI

SO long as I live I will remember the terrible night which I endured in that grim abode of man's cruelty and his brother's despair, awaiting, I knew not why, for the first grey pale finger of daylight, through those grim gratings in the high wall, which was to usher me forth to a felon's death.

I am now a man well waxed in years, and I was then but a mere youth, scarce, save for mine ill-upbringing, which aged me ere my time, more than a boy ; and I now marvel at my boldness of heart which made me endure that night, and the horror of that place, and the dread fate which awaited me. I even found myself speculating as to whether my brother had got off safe, and if so, how far he had got on his way. Then my mind would carry me further to imagine his welcome at Girnigoe Castle, and the great joy of those who looked with anguish and despair for his return. Then when I thought of her—for my mind would ever revert to her and her last words to me, God bless her!—I knew that she would be glad to know that I had done this, and had died bravely ; and I knew that if none else cared or remembered my

sad fate, that she at least would know, and would understand; and this were worth all. It was this one thought, dwelling on which over and over kept me sane and in my right mind, and strong and bold to meet bravely what I had to undergo with a firm heart, praying God that it should soon be over.

I know not how long it was that I sat thus awaiting the end. It was hours afterward, but it seemed years of waiting, that the cruel white dawn came peering in ghastly lines of light, down through that grim window, and smote me with the thought that my time on earth was drawing rapidly to an end. I had once heard of the famous mound of earth that stood somewhere outside of this dread castle of ancient kings and mighty lords, where men, doomed like myself, had gone forth to meet their death. And I knew that it would be there that I would look for the last time on the pitiless heaven, and the eyes of cruel men, ere I passed from memory of the living.

I am, as is natural, a lover of our old homes of Scotland's nobility, and I am proud of this ancient hold, Girnigoe of the Cattynes, because of the glory of the names and deeds of mine ancestors that hangeth about and broodeth over its stateliness of bastion and wall. Though there hath, on the other hand, been much that was hideous and cruel attached to its memory—deeds which, because of their evil, had better be forgotten than remembered of men; yet even for all this,—I have a pride in its walls, its towers, and the

name and line which its splendour represents. But there is one keep in all Scotland which I want never to cast eyes on again, and that is the most renowned of all amid the most stately holds and ancient towers, namely, the great castle and royal hold, Stirling.

The morning light grew whiter and whiter, until I could in some sort of manner again make out the gloomy appearance and hideous loneliness of my sombre prison, for the wick in the lamp had long since sputtered out, leaving me in that darkness commensurate with the sad gloom of my thoughts and feelings. I sat there in that chair in a condition of half-stupor caused by much fatigue from want of sleep and the great strain of mind consequent on my position, in which the events of the past and the dread of the future mingled themselves in a sort of confused dream, which was neither of sleep nor of waking; when at last I heard the sound of the withdrawing of bolts, and the clinking of chains, and my door swung out on its grim hinges. Then I awoke with a start as one from a half-dream of the morning, and gathered myself together with some firmness to meet my fate, and play the part, as a man should, which I had assumed. I sometimes since have thought that it might have mattered little had they known the truth of the trick I was playing on them, seeing that by that time my brother was well out of their clutches. But at the time I could not think clearly on any matter, and had much trouble to keep my mind on the main work

which was before me, and to play in simulation, what I really was in truth, the imprisoned Earl of the Cattynes. I stood up, and tried to look brave and unconcerned, for I rightly supposed it was my grim keeper come with his fellows to lead me forth to execution.

There were three who entered, and when the mist had cleared from mine eyes I saw them stand before me. One was the shambling old keeper, my guide of the night before ; the second was a companion brute, his fellow-hound in cruelty and besottishness. The third man needs more detailed description, for he was the officer sent by the governor to lead me forth to whatever fate they had in store for me. He was a short, stout man, of powerful frame, cased for the most part in mail, and had a hard indifference toward the work in hand that smote on me and told me, even before he spake, that the message he bore was one of death.

“Sirrah,” he said, “art thou the true and rightful Earl of the Cattynes, the body of whom I am sent to produce in person ? ” and his harsh tones fell with that sternness and cruelty befitting the place and scene. Even then it seemed a grim trick that Fate played me, while I was tricking all these cruel men, that I could speak the truth in all sincerity, as I answered boldly and straightforward—

“Yea, sirrah, I am the true and rightful Earl of the Orcades and the Cattynes, son of Ian, my father, now dead, of noble memory.”

“Then thou wilt soon join that same father,” he answered. “For I am sent to bring thee into the

presence of that princely Albany whose very smile is death, and who never sendeth for any from this place save those whom he would put out of life ! ”

“ Save thy words, thou cruel man,” I answered. “ I am he whom you seek. Do your will.”

“ Then, in short,” he cried, “ I, Sir Ambrose Whachope, knight, am sent by the most potent Prince Albany to fetch thee, the treasonable master and late Earl of the Cattynes, into his royal presence immediate, there to receive thy doom; so for such prepare thee.” Then he said to the keepers, harshly, “ Do ye your work,” and in a short time these grim men had fastened to my wrists and ankles heavy, galling chains; then, with one of them on each side of me, I left the room, and followed the knight by ways of long, grim corridors, dark passages and gloomy stairs, until at last we arrived at a great door, where men guarded the entrance, and where at last we were ushered into a large and lofty apartment, fashioned and furnished in noble stateliness.

At the upper end sat some men, who by their person and manner I took to be high in the State, and prominent among them sat one whom I at once knew by his cold sinister face, manner, and commanding presence, to be my dread cousin Robert the Duke of Albany. He wore a handsome dark cloak trimmed with fur, and had on his head an earl’s bonnet, made of some rich stuff. Round his neck, hanging well down in front, was a massive gold chain of broad flat links, and attached thereto was a medal of some

Order, either of our land or of France. As he looked at me I forgot all that dread company of judges in whose presence I stood, for there was a look on his face, as I fronted him, like that of mine uncle Angus, only of an even darker and more commandingly ill and cruel aspect. But when he spake it was with the sweetest voice I had ever heard in a man, although there was a cruel undernote to it, and did not one see the face of the man himself he had been deceived into thinking that it was the voice of human tenderness and pity for his fellow-men. His was a rarely cruel and ambitious nature, and the dread manner in which he compassed the death of my cousin, his nephew Rothsay, so soon after this affair of mine, hath left a stain on his name which is but ill to our house, and scarce equalled in cruelty in the worst annals of our history.

“Well, my proud earl,” he cried, and his voice sounded like some silver bell on my troubled ear, “art thou that same renegade to our sovereign brother and the laws of this unhappy State?” and his voice seemed sorrowful toward me, as if he held pity rather than sense of revenge and hate against his unfortunate cousin of the Cattynes. But I knew by his face that there was but a false hope in the sweet sorrow of his voice, and I answered as well as I could—

“My lord prince, if thou meanest who am I, I am that most unhappy of lords in this unhappy land, the rightful Earl of the Cattynes.”

“I meant not,” he answered, “of thy right to the earldom. It will need thee little, I sorrow to say, but shortly.

But methinks," looking at me deeply and speaking sternly, "that thou hast changed somewhat since we last met?"

Now this question startled me. I had not thought of this chance, that he might have known my brother. Had this strange man by his subtle skill discovered what none else could see? I determined, however, to put a bold face on the matter, and I answered, "If thou meanest, sir duke, that I am changed in person, thou art right; for the cruelty of oppression, the ill gloom of my cell, and the apprehension of my fate at thy hands, have made but an ill man of me, so that I can scarce know now the person I am become."

"Thou wilt know me waur later," he said, and the sweet voice but ill hid the poison that showed in his face when he said it. "Thou and thy father betwixt thee have doomed thy house, and by thy lawless deeds toward Holy Church made thy name a horror in this land, till I shame to know that there be blood connection betwixt us. Then I have heard that about thyself which maketh it impossible that thou shouldst go unpunished, for fear that greater ill should come."

By this I must have made some friendship for mine unhappy state among several of my judges; for a tall lord, clothed in armour, turned and said, "Most noble Albany, can there not be some manner of punishment meted out to this most unhappy young man short of the worst?"

"What mean you, Seton?" said the prince, in his most sweet manner. "You were ever quick to side with treason against mine august brother."

“My Lord Albany,” cried the other in quick anger, “lay no such charge on me! Thy royal brother and his interest were ever mine, and that of my sword to defend him, even were it against thee!” and he said this in a tone that would have roused any other man save this most subtle character.

“Yea, most noble Seton,” he answered, as sweetly as before, “my royal brother well knows thine aspersions against myself. But I remember now; this youth hath some hope to contract marriage with a lady of thy house. Is it not so? And hath he not some blood kinship also which giveth rise to thy pity?”

“Nay, most noble prince! ’Tis not this which moveth me in the matter,” cried the Lord Seton. “But I grieve for so brave and well-looking a youth, who is yet young, and suffering, as we all know, for his father’s sin, who is now dead and called to account elsewhere. But were thy words true, ’tis but nature, and I appeal to thee, is he not of thy blood also?”

“This,” answered Albany, “is all the more reason that we should make the punishment of the sin not over light; for if we allow those of our own blood to err against the State, how can we fairly rule this great land with justice to all?” And he looked at them there as though he were the most impartial judge, and not the most cruel and tyrannous of men, which our times have seen; and my whole heart rose in scorn that I should owe my life to the hands of such a man, and I burned with shame and anger that he should be called of my blood. So I cried out—

“ I want no pity at his hands, my lords ; but justice in the sight of Heaven ! ” At this they all stared at me as though I were mad, and a whisper ran among them. Then several spoke out, following each other, but all to the same effect, that I should be spared the extreme punishment, which they saw the duke desired should be my fate. Yet all, save a few, spake as men holding a natural dread of this terrible cousin of mine, who held the power of Scotland in his hands, and who, under a pretence of mercy to some and justice to all, practised the most cruel tyranny ; and held the inward ambition of ousting his brother’s family from that throne which he had sworn to obey and protect.

But this man was one who knew how far to go, and when to stay his hand ; and he saw that there were few there who held his view of my case as one to be worthy of death. But, as I soon found to my cost, he had a way of his own of seeming to give in to others and to forego one revenge for another even more terrible.

“ Ye speak truly, most noble lords,” he said. “ In a sense the late earl, our renegade cousin of the Cattynes, was most to blame for the deeds done in the earldom ; and in chief for this most heinous murder of a prince of Holy Church, a crime unsurpassed in its cruelty and sacrilege ; so much so, that it hath caused this kingdom to shudder ; and ill would it be were the Holy Father and the princes of the Church in this realm to hear that ye most noble earls and barons passed over such a crime as so light a matter.”

At this subtle argument, which appealed to that

common fear of the Church which is shared by the Lords and Commons of our realm, I could see that Albany had made a strong point against me. But he continued—

“Seeing that the father were the greater sinner in this matter, perchance the son may be able to clear himself as regards this crime, even though he be guilty of other ones, including the direct defiance of the King’s orders and commands, even to the extent of bringing about bloodshed among his liege’s loyal subjects.” Then, turning to me, he said—

“Perchance thou canst satisfy these thy peers of thine absence from that most sacrilegious attack on the Church’s hold. Wert thou present on that occasion?”

“My lord prince,” I answered, “it were useless to deny that I was of the party who committed that unhappy act. But I must say plainly that though my late father the earl may have been much to blame, yet the unfortunate bishop was equally, if not more so, to blame; and by his wicked and unchurchly treachery and pride brought about his own destruction, which he had not done had he kept himself to the affairs of the soul, which matters alone it being his duty to attend to.”

Now there was much in what I said that would have appealed to the sense of most of my judges; but the wily Albany at once exclaimed—

“See ye that he not only acknowledges his part in the crime, but justifies its occurrence?” Then turning to me, he said—

“Neither do I suppose, my lord earl, that the sword

of so gallant an exponent of thy father's crimes was altogether guiltless of blood-letting on that occasion ? ”

Now he had me in ill case, for, as I have already shown, I took no part in the attack. But to parley with this cruel man I saw was useless, and to explain why I used my sword on that occasion was beyond me, seeing it would be to deny the part I was now playing ; so I answered—

“Of a truth, my lord prince, I cannot deny that it was.”

“He hath convicted himself on his own lips, my lords,” he said. “But I sorrow that so young a man should die before he hath had time to turn from his errors. Therefore, my lords, I have considered it right that his life should be spared at this present, and that his many crimes, which merited that extreme punishment, should be forgiven him to that extent.”

At this there was a slight murmur of applause for the mercy shown me ; but the most kept silent, for they knew that the duke's mercy was ever more dread than his condemnation, and I for my part had so well read the man, that I knew something terrible was yet to come. So I stood there silent and held my breath till he continued—

“Therefore,” he said slowly, eyeing me with a sinister look, “it is not our will that he should suffer penalty of death ; nor is it our will that the earldom of the Cattynes should now be as yet abrogated to the Crown, and so cause that greatest of all ills, a rivalry for its honours and possessions among ye, my lord earls.” And he looked them over with some sarcasm. Then he continued—

“We have taken counsel with a wise father in the Church, a near relative of this young man, and as we have made vow to our patron saint that this same lord should see his earldom no more, we have decided to send him back thereto after receiving that punishment for his crimes which our royal brother’s forgiving mercy and favour have meted out to him.” Then, in his sweetest tones, he continued—

“Most noble, but renegade Earl of the Cattynes, it is the royal will that this day, for thy many sins committed against this kingdom of Scotland, you be taken to the proper place for such punishment, and that there, by the hand of our appointed executioner, you suffer the penalty of having your sight for ever destroyed by the ordeal of red-hot irons; and may Heaven in its mercy have pity on your soul!”

At this dread sentence, the most terrible next to death itself, and in the eyes of many even worse, a shudder ran through the assembled company of lords, some of whom looked on me with a sad compassion. There was some murmuring, but no spoken remonstrance save by the Lord Seton, who, standing up and facing the duke, said—

“And I, my lord prince, will have naught to do with this most cruel and brutal deed!” and so saying he left the hall.

The prince spoke not a word, but merely smiled. Then, turning to the men who guarded me, he said to them sternly, “Do your duty!” And with a sense of horror that overcame me, I was led forth from his presence.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE terrible tragedy which now took place, and in which I was a sad and unwilling actor, would have been omitted by me in this relation of my history, as one too revolting in its particulars, and painful in its detail of human suffering ; and as, in his play, the tragedian leaves those parts of his story to be understood as having taken place, so would I have curtailed this story, which already groweth over long, were it not that a strange thing happened in connection with this bitter experience of mine which it is necessary to relate, and which showeth how remarkable is the hand of Providence, or of Fate, in the strangely commingled fortunes of this evil world.

I left the judgment hall of that grim castle, led by those brutal keepers, with a strange ringing in mine ears, and a film of mist, as it were, before my sight ; and none may blame me for this ; for who would not have felt as I did in such dread circumstances ? I had entered that place, prepared, as much as any poor mortal man can be, for death ; yea, death in its most revolting form to most men ; but death at least, sharp and sudden, which would end all. But for this new horror I was not

prepared, and to undergo this most hideous mutilation made me shudder, and turned all the world of man into a hideous mask of cruelty before mine eye. To him who hath a love of the beautiful in the face of Nature, who seeth fairness and sweetness in all form, who knoweth the face and presence of friend and beloved : to this one, to have the windows of this world closed to him for ever, and still to linger on, perchance for years, a poor, sightless trunk ; to have to pick his way where others might walk in full enjoyment of their power, were a terrible alternative, and to me in particular one for which I had no heart, and but a great horror. To some souls anything might have been better than death, so long as they should be near those they loved, to hold communion in no matter what form ; but to me, as I was situated, where all was hopeless so far as this world was concerned, the ordeal I was to undergo was too horrible to contemplate. It has ever been a marvel to me how men can be so hideously cruel to their fellow-beings. I could understand the fierce cruelty of a soul in agony in quick, sudden anger taking terrible revenge for some great wrong done. This may be understood as a mood of one who hath lost his mind, one to be deplored, but pitied. But this cold, cruel, calculating nature, such as could send a young man to a doom like mine, is beyond mine understanding ; and can only be explained by those demonologists who, among our Church fathers, have considered such pitiless souls as creations of the

foul fiend himself to corrupt and torment this world.

I can never look back on the hours that followed without a sense of great horror and shuddering at what my soul suffered, ere I had to undergo the final excruciating agony. The most terrible thing I had to contend with, however, was the utter hopelessness that overcame me at thought of my cruel fate ; and I believed that, had I known they would have satisfied me, I would have prayed those cruel men to kill me outright. I cannot understand why I did not fight to the last with the despairing energy of a wild beast brought to bay, ere I would have let them do to me what they did. But so terrible was my hopelessness, that I walked between those grim men like one in a dream, from which there is no waking. This they seemed also to perceive, for they forebore those taunting cruelties commonly practised on their prisoners by their keepers at such times. So they led me, the two guards and the officer, downstairs and along corridors of that dread keep, until at last we emerged from a side postern into a large square yard, from which there smote on mine ears once more the one-time merry ring of hammers on clinking iron. Then, as it seemed, my senses came back once more, and I became a living man, acute to feel and note what was going on around me, and to expect what was about to occur. It was a large place, well littered about with bits of armour, helmets, broken swords and spears, and all the gear pertaining to the work of a master-

armourer. There were a forge and two anvils, and upon one of the latter a strapping apprentice was beating life into a blade he was fashioning in merry mood to drink life of some poor mortal. As he worked he sang the while a gay troll or catch. I remember it well, his gay song and heartless mood, as I thought then, who could so lightly sing in so cruel a world. His song, as I remember it, went thus—

“Laugh, love, and sing alway;
Life be made for sport and play;
Happy the open and close of day,
For soon our beauty it be but clay,—
While merrily rings the anvil.”

On the other anvil, with his back to us, and by his side a brimming flagon of nut-brown ale, and a great lump of bread-and-meat in his hand, sat the other smith, who seemed by his build and appearance to be the master of the forge.

“Ho! master armourer,” cried the officer. “Heat thy searing iron in thy forge red-hot, for we have brought thee a fine pair of eyes for thee to scorch the daylight out of. So haste thee, for we be in a hurry.”

Then the strange thing happened which I have to tell; for he slowly rose, and, placing the can of ale whence he had taken it, being about to indulge in a long draught, turned about to look at us; and to my amazement there stood before me the master-armourer of Girnigoe, to whom I had served apprenticeship.

It hath been said that such sudden encounters or

surprises have been the test of real gift in most men. If this be so, the master-armourer must have been a man of wondrous resolve, at least so I have thought ever since ; and he hath been well rewarded for his cool mother-wit that summer's morn, when he was sudden called from his meat and ale to act executioner to his former companion and apprentice.

As for me, I started back ere I could hide mine emotion, and at first it shot through my brain that this was my reward for setting mine uncle the MacLeod free, that this man should come here to do me this ill office. Then it seemed that there might come some amelioration of my misery, seeing that he knew me, and would remember old kindness on my part. But I was but ill prepared for his action toward me. It is true that at first his jaw dropped in some amazement, but he was the first to recover his wit, and said naught.

“ Well, master armourer, ye seem to have met afore,” said the officer.

But if I thought my quondam acquaintance was to befriend me, I was sorely disappointed, for he said in but surly tones—

“ ’Tis with no gladness that I set eyes on him again, sir officer.”

At this I was indignant that he should so repudiate our former friendship, but remembered that it was ever so in this world when a man is down.

“ Now that I mind me,” said the officer, “ ye hailed yourself from this man's hold, did ye not ? ”

“If ye mean that I ran away from Girnigoe, that I did, and with right goodwill,” said the smith.

“Then thine will be a right merry work this morn, my brave master armourer,” answered the officer. “Old scores are sometimes repaid even to my lord earls, are they not?”

The armourer started at this, and looked at me wonderingly. But I spake not. Then, to my horror and astonishment, my one-time acquaintance said in stern tone to the keepers—

“Bring yon dog this way, that we may put his eye-holes out.”

I could no longer hold myself, but said—

“Sirrah, hast thou no heart, no remembrance?” But he only laughed in my face, and said to the musical apprentice, who had stayed in his song to look at me in a kind of dull wonder—

“Heat thy searing iron, and heat it well! Mind thou gettest it hot as thou canst!” Even the officer was surprised at his brutal mood, for he said—

“It must be a deep grudge thou owest him.”

“’Tis little else we poor get from his kind,” said the armourer. “’Tis my turn now, fear not!” he said to the officer, but looking at me. “I will do my work well!”

The apprentice was now blowing at the forge all he was able; but the fierce armourer was not satisfied, but cried in anger, with many oaths—

“Heat it hot, to hell’s hotness! Nothing short will do him!”

I was more and more amazed at this madman, as I thought him, but I was to be more amazed yet.

“Carry not thy fierceness too far !” cried the officer, “for his death would be a sore work on our hands.”

“Cry not mercy to me, damn you !” cried the armourer. “Mercy for such as him !” he said, with an oath, and to my wonder and indignation he took up his flagon of untasted ale, and crying, “Take that, thou dog of an earl !” flung the contents in my face with such force and direction that for an instant I was blinded with the stuff, that covered my face and ran down on my doublet.

“Dog of an armourer !” cried the officer, “thy contempt carrieth thee too far !” but the keepers only laughed a brutal laugh at this eccentricity of the master armourer. As for me, I tried to wipe my face with my manacled hands, but could not ; and amid disgust and horror was standing in amazement, when I was surprised to hear him whisper as he passed me to examine mine eyes—

“As thou valuest thy life, wipe it not off !” Then he said in brutal tones to the keepers, “Hold him tight ! Let him not move on your lives !” Then he turned to the apprentice and shouted, in tones of hard command—

“Quick, now, the iron ere it cools !” But another dread event was to happen. Just as I was looking, as I thought, for the last time on sweet blue skies and heaven’s sunlight, a man rushed with an agonising yell



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into the courtyard ; and to my surprise I saw it was mine evil uncle, the priest. There was a terrible look on his face, as of one who had been trapped in his own ill-desires, as he cried—

“Stay, ye fiends ! Stay ! It is all a mistake !” Then, ere anyone could speak or stir, he fell in a dread fit, such as I had seen once before on the sands at Girnigoe. But they minded him not any more than though he were a dog ; and ere I could cry or think, those cruel men had me in a vice. There came a noise of hissing and hot metal ; and a white agonising and blinding light swept across my face with a pain as of hell ; and for some time after I knew no more.

CHAPTER XXVIII

IT seemed days after that I came to myself to find that all was black, save for a dim sense of the light of the world beyond my shut tent of vision. And I knew that I was in the open, and on my way back to Girnigoe. Then all came back to me with a rush and a memory of my dread position. But ere I could moan, drink was at my lips, and a voice said in compassion and respect—

“My lord earl, doth the pain leave you?” It was the voice of the leech who spoke, who now attended me with great care; for now that the duke’s revenge was worked on me, I was treated with all deference and respect as became my position. Yea, I was an earl now, or the mock shadow of one, and they were taking me back in grim splendour to Girnigoe. I tried to think and to plan or wonder how all would come out; but the pain in mine eyes was maddening, and I was glad when the leech placed some cool, soothing lotion on them and relieved me, as a sick child is tended by its mother. In this manner and this dread condition, after fourteen days, did I arrive at Castle Girnigoe. It was a sad entry for me, and for those who expected me; for, as I

found afterward, the dread ill that had befallen me had reached Girnigoe sooner than I, as ill-news doth ever fly quickly; while the real earl, my brother Hugh, having got back in disguise, had for several reasons kept himself in secret; for that by all, he having arrived at night, he was taken for me and so treated. Whatever his feelings were, I knew not for some time; but, as matters now stood, it was a tragical situation, and one which, in mine agony of pain and darkness, seemed to me to be past working out.

The lady countess, who was in much anguish of mind, thinking me her son the earl, received me in great woe of heart, and had me borne at once to the earl's room; for the leech had said that if there was any slight chance of mine ever seeing day again, I must for some months be kept in darkness. This chance hope given me, I learned afterwards, was all owing to the friendship and splendid mother-wit of the good master-armourer; and his mode of saving me was by means of those actions which were considered greatest evidence of his hatred to me, the deluging me with the ale and the heating of the iron to the hottest point, both combining, I am told, to form a sort of film or coating over the eye-ball; and so protected the inner part from the too fierce heat of the dread iron. For all this, I was in sad darkness for many a day, and never even unto this time have fully recovered so as to see God's heaven and the face of Nature and my fellow-men as some souls do. But of this all in its place. For the time, the greatest woe

to me was the way in which the poor countess, whom I now pitied in my heart, went on about me, kissing me with much protestation, and saying that her pride had killed me and had been my destruction.

"My son! Oh, my son Hugh!" she said, as she leaned over my couch in the dark apartment, "why do you not speak to me? Why art thou so cold to thy mother?" But I was afraid to trust my voice. "Speak to me, Hugh!" she wailed. "Tell thy mother that thou forgivest her for her mad counsel! Speak to me, and say that thou dost forgive me!"

"I forgive thee!" I said in a weak voice.

"Say that thou still lovest me!" she cried.

"Yea, I sorrow for thee, even after all, and pity thee!" I cried, and I meant what I said, for her woe went to my heart, and I dreaded the hour when all this would have to be revealed.

"Thou art weak, my son," she said, as she fixed my couch in that tender manner only a woman can. "Thou wantest rest."

"Yea, I would be alone!" I cried.

"Yea, madam," added the leech, "would you have him recover he must be left alone with much rest and quiet."

"Then I will leave thee, my son," she said, and she leaned over and kissed my brow, and a feeling that it and her woe gave me, together with my sense of the whole sad matter and my dread blindness, smote me so that I broke down and sobbed.

“Now, madam, you must leave him,” cried the leech, and with much grief and tenderness she went. Then the leech dressed mine eyes and gave me some cool restorative, and departed also. He was a wise man, according to his light, and trusted much to Nature, and little to those quackeries practised by many of our mediciners. So I was left alone with my thoughts; and they were all that I had left me. But my mind was busy on two matters: first, I marvelled where she was; then I questioned what was become of Hugh. These two thoughts worried me for some time, and much as I would try to drive them away they would come back. As I lay there in this meditation, the door opened softly, and I heard a step approach my couch, and a voice, that of Hugh, said, in a sad, despairing tone—

“Ian, my brother!” and he had my hand in his, and was kissing it, and weeping over it, as if he had now known me for the first time. “And thou didst all this for me?” he cried. “Thou gavest thy life, but it is all in vain!” he continued. “Why didst thou not let me die?”

“Hugh,” I answered, ‘I did it but for the best. I did it for you and for her.’”

“Yea,” he cried, “I see it all now, but it can never be as thou hast intended. My heart is broken. I now see your kindness to us all. Thou hast done what I may never repay; and all for what? I now know what is just in all this matter. Thou art the eldest son of our father, and the rightful earl to this great possession.

I have thought it all out ; and if my father did wrong thy mother, it is but mine to right this matter."

"Hugh," I answered, "I am but a wreck of a man ; stay thou here and keep thy place. Thy mother will never see this as thou dost."

"She must !" he cried. "Her pride hath been too strong in the past."

"But how is she to know ?" I cried. "She taketh me for thee, and her anguish is terrible. Dost think it right to cheat her thus ?"

"'Tis her just punishment," he answered. "My poor mother ! And who is there to tell her, for I cannot ? Oh, Ian," he continued, "I am weak ; oh ! so weak ! Ever since this dread imprisonment I am not the same man. But keep this mockery up for one day more, and I will reveal the whole truth."

"Hugh," I cried, "my brother, thou must not lose courage. 'Twill all come right in the end." Thus I spake to him ; but in my heart I wished that I might die. Then I said, "Where is she ? Hast thou seen her yet ?"

"Nay," he answered, "'tis this very matter of her that hath made me the poor weak thing that I am. I sorrow to say it, but I fear not for my mother ; though I know her trouble will be woeful and great ; but 'tis the other's scorn and contempt I fear."

"Not if she loveth thee truly," I cried.

"Nay, Ian, I am but a lost man," he answered, with a sort of sob. "Ever since I allowed thee to take my

place I feel as if I had lost myself. I should never have done it. Why didst thou tempt me? 'Tis I should have died for my house and mine honour, and not thou."

"Hugh," I answered, "try and face thee this matter as God would have thee. Thou hast done naught wrong. 'Twas I deceived thee. 'Twas for her sake also, remember that."

"Nay, thou art wrong, Ian," he answered. "Hear me out, for I am a dead man. Thou must know the truth, and thou alone, for thou hast done all, and thou lovest me, and thou art strong. Not to priest or other would I tell this. My mother must never know, nor she above all; but know thou that from the moment I entered that dread prison my hope of life went out like a wick in a lamp, and my manhood with it. The sight of those grim engines of torture, and the cruel eyes and taunts of those ill men, gave me a horror of all which lay before me, till I, who would have laughed at death, grew as fearsome and as cowardly as a girl with anticipation of what might come to me. I could not sleep at night, and I sat all day waiting and waiting, and every time that brute-keeper came to my door, I thought it was to take me forth to torture or death. Then I longed for the air and sunlight, and mine old freedom once again, as a sick man longs for health and strength; and when thou camest, oh! my brother, with that offer of thine, thou little knewest whom thou wert releasing, and with what a beating heart I took thine offer. Nay, nay, it were not mine earldom, nor even her; but my

poor terror, my craven fear that made me let thee make that sacrifice."

"Hugh," I cried, "thou art mad! Thou but fanciest all this. And were it true, 'tis but human and natural, for the sight of that prison made mine own heart sink even as it made thine."

"Yet," he cried, "thou wentest in and took my place, and I let thee, craven that I was, in my base weakness. Nay, thou art the more worthy! Oh, that I might die, and be out of all this, for I feel that by this mine act I have lost her, honour, and all." And with that he clasped my hand in a sort of clinging despair, as though I was his only strength, and with a sort of choked sob crept from the room.

I lay there long, and pondered over what he had said; for I felt that we were all in but evil case, and that somehow in my blind effort I had spoiled matters after all. Yet I knew not that it was Heaven which worked out in our poor broken souls those mysteries of its great will. But as I lay there I could not see all this, and relying on mine own poor plans, I marvelled how I could make it all come right for those two, her and him. As for myself, I was in mine own regard but a dead man; and had done with the things of this world for ever. The more I thought and pondered how I should keep true to my resolve not to reveal it all so as not to lower him in her eyes, the more the dread pain and darkness of my wounded sight vexed me and tortured me. And, above all this, there was a great

longing in my heart, such as a wounded creature might have, whom men say longs to go home to its own haunts to die, so longed I for one more sight of her, or knowledge of her presence, and then to pass from it all.

Then a wonderful thing did happen ; and it seemed as though Heaven, in its long forgetfulness of me, remembered at last, and gave answer to my prayer. For as I lay there the door opened and then shut, and though I heard but a light step, for all was but dread darkness to me, who only knew presence by sound and feeling, yet I knew as well as God was in heaven that it was she who stood before me. Then I lay still and let my heart beat, knowing that if I dared but speak I might reveal all ; and now I knew that it was not in the taking of Hugh's place, nor in the going to mutilation or death, but now, even now, that the great struggle of my life was to come. So I lay still and feigned sleep, though I felt if my heart beat so loud in my breast that she must have heard it like a bell proclaiming my love and fierce longing to take her into mine arms and die. Then I felt her come near and bend down ; and it is marvellous how many senses Nature gives to those in love ; but I felt her beauty and maidenly tenderness there in that room as a lily that bloomed therein. Then when I felt her lips on my fevered forehead, it were as if God had bent down and spoke to me at last. Then she spake as if to herself ; and a strange fear and wonder overcame me as she said—

“ God help me, and I have been untrue to him ! I

for whom he hath suffered all, and he so noble! Oh, that he might die in this blinded sleep and this great trouble, and never know that not only they who slew him were false, but I, even I, who should have loved him!" Then she fell on her knees beside my couch, for I felt the rustle of her garments as she knelt, and she cried, "Oh, God! Oh, dread Heaven! Have mercy, oh, have pity on the wayward heart of a poor young girl!" And her voice smote so pitiful, that I, who listened, marvelled at this terrible woe that could affect one so young and so beautiful. Then she continued: "Hear me, Mary, Mother of God! May I all my life be a true wife to him, so young, so noble, so ill-treated and blinded; may my eyes be a light to his, and my hand to lead him!" And when she said this I could no longer forbear, but broke out into a quick sob. At that I felt her start back, as if caught in her secret trouble; then she bent over me, and said, "My lord, art thou awake?" Then I could not longer keep silent, but said, trying to conceal my voice—

"My Lady Margaret, is it thou?"

At that, at the sound of my voice, or the way I said it, I know not—unless, I have since thought, it was her keen sense—or how it was she discovered me; but she sprang to her feet with a terrible cry, and called out, "Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!"

At that my lady countess came into the room, crying—

"My son! My son! Is he dead? Oh! tell me not he is dead!" But I could feel that other presence

lean over me, and I knew her startled, terrible anguish, and choked sobs, as she said these words: "Is it thou?"

"It is!" I answered. Then she cried, clutching my hand as in a vice, "And thou didst all this? Thou didst all this?"

"Yea, my lady," I cried. "Would to God I had done it better!"

"Oh! my fool heart," she said, "I might have known! I might have known!" At this the lady countess broke in, saying, "What meaneth this?"

"This, my lady," cried the Lady Margaret. "It meaneth that it is we, thou and I, who have been blind!"

"Girl!" cried the countess in terrible rage, "wouldst thou play with me?"

"Know you not, proud woman," answered the girl, "who this is? Not thy son! Not the Earl Hugh! But one far nobler, far greater than we all! Thy stepson Ian, who hath saved thy son."

"'Tis a lie! By Heaven, 'tis a foul lie!" cried the countess. Then she came near me, and for all her hatred I could not but be stirred by the woman's terrible anguish, which, though all was darkness, seemed to fill the room.

"Hugh!" she said; "dread Heaven! my son Hugh, tell me, thy mother, that it is all a lie!"

"Madam," I began, for I was bewildered by it all, "madam——" But I never got any further, for whether it was the awful shock, or the sudden sense of

her great wrong to me, I know not ; but with a terrible cry she fell forward to the ground as if dead.

“ Oh ! angered Heaven ! ” I cried, and I tried to rise, “ I have killed her ! ” Then there was a confused sound of footsteps in the room, and her women bore her out to her own apartments, and I met her no more.

“ Poor woman,” I cried, “ this will kill her ! ” but the soft hand that held mine shook, as the sweetest voice in the world said, “ Yea, if it do I care not. I hate her and them all, for what they have done to thee, to thee ; and even I drave thee to it.”

Then a great happiness stole over me, and I said, “ Margaret, I am but a poor wreck of a man, and not worthy of thee ! ” For I was afeard that it and she would all pass away like a glad dream of the night, and leave me more desolate than before. Then I remembered Hugh, and I cried—

“ Nay, this can never be ! Thou art pledged to Hugh,” and I gave an exceeding bitter cry, and I said, “ Margaret, thou art to me the only love and sunlight on this earth, and when I give thee up I give up all that I have to live for ; but oh ! my brother ! ”

“ Thy brother ! ” she cried. “ And he let thee do all this for him, and her, and me ! ”

“ Nay,” she continued, “ ’tis thou who deservest all ! I never loved him, but only tried to.”

“ My God ! ” I cried, “ let this not be a passing dream. Margaret,” I said, holding her hand, “ I am but a poor broken soul, tell me true, do not deceive me, by

thy pity for my poor, maimed, broken body ; but tell me, dost thou love me ? ”

“ Love thee,” she answered, “ I have loved thee from that hour when thou slewest that brute in the bishop’s castle. From that hour thou wert the one man in the world to me. But I thought that thou heldst ill against thy brother ; and that cruel woman worked on me, and forced me into betrothal with her son. I would have tried to do my duty to him, since I was but a young girl, sold from hand to hand as a slave ; and then I pitied him, seeing how he was treated ; but now mine eyes are opened as thine are closed.”

“ Margaret,” I answered, “ art thou sure of all this ? Then he is earl of all these proud lands, and I am but as naught.”

“ And it is that thou meanest ! Have I not wealth for both, and art thou not an earl’s son ? I will win place for us both. Thou art dearer to me than all the earls in the world.”

“ Come closer, my love ! ” I cried. “ I fear that this be but a dream, a sweet dream, sent by Heaven to me ere I die,” for I felt as though I were going. She came and placed her dear arms about my neck, and held me to her heart, as a mother would her child, and then as my lips touched hers there came a double blackness, and I knew no more.

But I did not die. Those sweet eyes were eyes to me, those hands as my hands, until, in God’s own time, I saw for myself once more, and became as other souls.

For let all the Churchmen and cynics in this world say nay, but the best hope and restorer in this world for a poor castaway man, such as I was, is the true love of a good and sweet woman.

There is little more of this story to tell. The next week a dread matter happened in Scotland. While I was being made happy, and was still helpless, and the poor lady countess was wrestling betwixt her pride and her sense of right, the news came that the young Prince David of Rothsay was found starved to death in the Douglas hold, and the proud Albany came down from his perch. Then my case came out. For my love had sent message at once to her friends of the whole merits of my cause, and the great cruelty done me ; and then another matter happened. The priest, mine uncle, who nearly died, did me justice at last, and a message came down post haste from Perth, where the King was staying, with a great document, proclaiming my rights as rightful Earl of the Cattynes, as elder son of Ian, the late earl, and his first wife and countess the Lady Morna MacLeod, whom report falsely proclaimed had been divorced, but which not being so, I as true heir of my father succeeded. When this news reached my lady countess, she rose from her couch, uttered my name with a terrible invective, and fell dead.

My brother Hugh departed soon after. He left me a letter, which was read to me by my dear nurse and counsellor ; it ran as follows, and I could not but grieve over it : “ Ian, my brother,” it said, “ forgive me and

mine for the ill we all did thee. 'Tis all the better that thou art to keep our house than that I should have kept it, seeing thou hast suffered, so thou hast thy just reward. Tell her I said it, that thou wert more worthy of her and of all than I could be. I go to carve me a new name, and chance a new fame ; or if not, at least to die.—Your brother Hugh.”

But I did not altogether lose sight of him. By mine influence and that of his mother's family, he had a place among the leading soldiers at the Court, and rose in favour with the King ; and going with the young Prince James, our cousin, into France, was imprisoned with him in England ; but returning at last he married a great lady, and founded the cadet house of our family of that name.

But I have other matters to relate. Six months after, I was married in great state to her who hath been my friend and comforter ever since ; and we have done much by our lives to change the nature and reputation of our place and name in this country from that of mere savage warfare to the gentler arts of peace. In all this she hath been my guide and companion. My mother's remains I had removed to a vault, which I built in the castle chapel, where she sleeps near that other great and proud woman, my stepmother. So strange is the mutability of chance and the obliviousness of time and death. Mine uncle, the great MacLeod, hath still dwelt with his own people, and hath waxed greater than even his mighty forefathers in the pride and power of his race

in the Western Islands of Scotland. Mine armourer I sent for, as soon as I could ; and he occupies a good place at Girnigoe. His skill has long since left him, but he still liveth in an extreme old age, and groweth garrulous as he groweth older, a strange curse to fall upon a one-time silent man. I would add, that his position as executioner during my time hath fallen into abeyance.

I have but one more matter to relate, and it hath to do with mine uncle Angus. A week after I had been secured in my rightful position, a letter was brought me bearing his signature. I have had it in possession ever since, and it was the last communication I had from him, for he went abroad to France soon after, and there died in the end a great Churchman. The letter ran as follows :—

“ MY MAD NEPHEW,—Either it hath been fated that a fool should mar the best and wisest plans of men, or else thou art a deeper villain than thine uncle Angus. Be what thou mayest, I have done with thee and thy ways for ever. That wisdom may give thee sight to see the ruin thou hast made of thy life is the only remaining wish of
ANGUS SINCLAIR.”

But read to me by her sweet voice, his and all former bitterness had lost its sting for evermore.

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